

GENTLE STRANGER

Lisa had grown up in a camp for displaced persons on the Continent knowing nothing of her family, nor even from which country she came. Fortune seemed to smile on her when she was chosen by Major Brown's wife to become nanny to their small son and, in England, she delighted in all the pleasures of home life and the unimagined excitements of living in London. In the Browns' household she was a great success ; no domestic chore was too much for her and her cooking was admired by everyone who came to the house. Steve Fairfield, who came to dinner one night, found himself in love with her but had no opportunity of seeing her again. For Mrs. Brown was a hard, cold woman, envious and afraid of Lisa's glowing loveliness, and Lisa found herself suddenly dismissed.

In her terrible loneliness she was befriended by a charming and courteous little man from the Burmese Embassy nearby. Soon he persuaded her to marry him and to go with him to Burma where his uncle was a very rich man. But life in Burma was not as easy, nor as successful as Lisa's gentle stranger had expected, and she was to go through many adventures before she found happiness.

By the same Author

FANTASTIC JOURNEY

LAST LOVE

SONG BEFORE DAWN

THE BROKEN MOON

THE ONE I LOVE

THE STAG AT BAY

THE BLACKTHORN WINTER

CANDLES IN THE DARK

THE HOUSE WITHOUT DOORS

GENTLE STRANGER

BY
DOROTHY BLACK



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*Dreaming of deeds we mean to do,
All complete in a minute or two.
Something noble, and grand, and good,
Won by merely wishing we could.*

KIPLING

The Banderlog.

ONE

SHE still awoke in the night sometimes, screaming, for she dreamed the great iron gates were closing behind her once more and she was being herded back down the grey cement path of the camp for displaced persons—to the wooden huts round the dusty enclosed square that was all the playground she had ever known.

Mrs. Brown said, 'Really, Lisa, you must control yourself. You wake little John. It isn't good for him.'

Not that little John minded. He would sit up in his cot spry as a bunnie in a cage, and fix her with his agate eye.

'What's wrong with you, Lisa! Did you dream of a bogey?'

'Yes,' she would say patting him to sleep again. 'Of many bogies. But now they have gone.'

Little John was seven. His mother loved him in her way but she hadn't much time for him. It was for Lisa he kept his loving baby ways. He could understand her from the beginning. Even when her English was not very good. But then Lisa had had a lot of practice with people whose language she could not understand.

In the displaced persons' camp where she had spent her childhood a great many people could not understand one another, for they came from all kinds of places. There had been black children as well as white in there, and yellow children who spoke a strange sing-song language and could understand one another, but nobody else could understand them. There had been Austrians, Poles, and Lithuanians, and there had been one strange flat-faced little boy whom nobody else understood at all. A strange lost little boy, he had come back on a plane with a load of prisoners, and how he got there or why, nobody knew, and no one had time in those bitter days, to find out.

For a long time he lay in the hospital looking like a doll. Sometimes he opened his boot-button eyes for a moment and then shut them again quickly, as if unable to bear what he saw

In the end, they handed him over to Lisa. She grew fond of him, and though he spoke no known language she came in time to know what he meant, the way one child will understand another. He was a quiet little boy, gentle and amenable, and he gave them no trouble, save when an aeroplane passed over the camp. Then he would fall flat on his back and lie there, his arms outstretched, his eyes tight shut, spreadeagled in some kind of a fit.

Why he did this, and what awful memories an aircraft awoke in him, nobody ever knew. He died when the winter came. It was very cold in the dippy camp in the winter, and the aircraft he had landed in had come from the land of the sun. Lisa wept bitterly when they told her, but nobody else bothered about him. There were too many children all waiting there to be claimed and nobody ever claimed them. Sometimes the House Mother was beside herself, not knowing which way to turn to keep them all clothed.

She found Lisa a great help. 'From the beginning,' she said long after, 'she was not like the others. She was one apart.' She would watch the little girl thoughtfully, wondering.

In the dippy camp they were overworked and over-driven, and there was never enough of anything. Not enough beds to go round, or warm clothes for the snowy months which seemed to last so long. Indeed looking back on it, it seemed to Lisa that it had always been winter there. Cold cruel winter, and the puddles'lying on the grey asphalt paths like pieces of glass.

The authorities did their best. The children were treated with rough kindness, taught to read and write, and to keep themselves clean. Clothing was a problem. From time to time bundles of cast-off garments arrived and were doled out, and it was a question of make the best of what you get. Lisa had a black skirt that had belonged to quite an old lady, and a long black tubular coat, and some shoes so large for her that even with newspaper padding she slipper-slopped about in them. Like a little scarecrow she went by, a string of younger children always tagging after her.

'It's a shame. . . . If there was only something I could do,' thought the House Mother, and she made a resolution to ask the Pastor's wife next time she came, if there weren't some nicer

clothes to be had, something suitable for a child of fifteen. But she herself was driven and overworked like everyone else. Clearing up the mess and misery left over from years of war.

In one of the uninhabited huts at the far end of the camp, they ran a school. The teaching was all done by voluntary contribution. There were masters there of the highest standard, able to teach any subject under the sun. Teachers and professors cast out of their own countries, who no longer had a job, were glad to find something to fill the dreary days. Sad musicians there were there, with no money to buy themselves the instruments they played on. They taught the children the songs of distant lands none of them would ever sing again, the forgotten lullabies of long ago. And sitting there on sacks on the floor, beside the packing cases that served as tables, they told the children fairy tales of the far off countries they came from, and they planned each for himself a wonderful future of what would happen one day. Sometime. . . . When I get away. . . . When I get out of here.

Many of them were never to get out, and maybe in their own hearts they knew it, but men must have a dream.

There was the Herr Doctor. He was a gentle, flimsy old man with a hawk's face, with very pale blue eyes that in spite of everything had a laugh in them. As though in his secret soul he saw a joke that nobody else there in the dippy camp could see. He walked with a limp and most of the fingers on his right hand were missing.

'What did you do with the fingers of the hand, Herr Doctor?' the children asked him.

'I cut them off and planted them to see if they would grow into trees,' he said, and the twinkle was there in his eyes. 'I had a mind to grow a fine fence round my castle.'

'And did they grow into trees?'

The Herr Doctor said, 'No.'

'Did you live in a castle?'

The Herr Doctor said, 'I did. It was beautiful there in spring time. Lilies of the valley filled up all the woods, and after them came the cherry blossom. Like snow it filled up all the valley. My castle was in a countryside that was always full of flowers.'

The children asked him, 'What is a flower?'

It wasn't easy to explain, there in the dippy camp where nothing grew, but he tried to draw a lily of the valley for them with a piece of sharp stick, in the sand.

He was a great teller of tales, a dreamer of dreams. He could conjure up sleeping princesses, and many a nymph and fairy, and the Lorelei sitting upon her rock in the middle of the Rhine, combing her shining hair with a golden comb, and singing her song as she lured sailors to their doom.

'What did she lure them for?' asked the children.

'Ladies,' said the Herr Doctor, 'are fond of luring,' and his gentle eyes fell on Lisa who sat on the edge of the little crowd, nursing the flat-faced little boy who understood nothing, and who had not died as yet. 'Sing, my child,' he said to her. 'But never sing that kind of song, for it is one too commonly heard in the world today. This is the age of self-indulgence and grab, and the smasher-down appears greater than the builder-up, only in the long run it is not the case. The happy people are those who learn to give, and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds.'

'Shall I ever have anything to give?' asked Lisa shyly. He smiled at her and said, 'I think you will.'

And he told them the story of Brunhilda asleep inside her ring of flames, waiting until her Prince came. The children were always very fond of stories with fire in them. It seemed to help to warm their feet.

'Does the prince always come?' Lisa asked.

'Always,' said the Herr Doctor firmly. 'The trouble is, one does not always recognize him. Oh Jerusalem, hadst thou but known in thy day—but now are these things hidden from thine eyes!' He broke off and for a moment the laugh went out of his eyes and he sat brooding. The children said nothing at all. They waited. Often they could not understand him.

Presently he seemed to come up out of his unhappy memory, and he went on:

'The trouble is, he comes, but a prince does not always look like a prince. And then again there comes another, who looks like a prince, but he is not a prince. At any rate, not the right kind. And woe, woe to those who are led astray.'

Lisa said sadly, 'How can one know? It is too difficult.'

'It is difficult,' said the Herr Doctor. 'For he may come as a frog, or as a tiger, or he may come under some bad spell and be unable to declare himself until someone believes in him and gives him the kiss of love. That is the great thing. To have the courage to give the kiss of love. To love and not to count the cost,' said the Herr Doctor, and again he was lost in his private wilderness of sadness.

Just then an aeroplane passed over and zoomed low over the camp, and the little boy fell flat on his back as usual, seized with his odd species of fit, so Lisa had no more time to pursue the problem of love.

Sometimes the Herr Doctor took a little flute from his pocket and shook the moisture from it, and played them tunes. Gay tunes, and sad tunes. 'Auf jeder Zeit wie liebt ich dich, mein Leben,' or 'O du lieber Augustine.' And the children picked up the words and learned to sing with him. The Herr Doctor knew a great many songs. He could sing Polish songs for the Polish children and French songs for the French children. 'Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrot,' sang the Herr Doctor, and the little girl Marie began to cry bitterly when she heard that tune, for it reminded her of something, though she could not recall what it was. After that the Herr Doctor did not sing French songs to them any more, and he made Marie a beautiful little doll out of a clothespeg.

His favourite was always Lisa. It was a pleasure to teach Lisa things, she learned so quickly, and she had a small true clear little singing voice, so that he would sit, his hands knotted round his knees, his kind pale eyes fixed on her, as she sang back to him the songs he had taught her, and he got real pleasure from it.

'Who are you, I wonder?' he asked her. 'Think, my child. Can you remember nothing?'

She screwed up her eyes trying to remember for his sake, for she longed to please him. But the book was there in her hands, fast shut, and she could not open it or turn a page of it. Only sometimes when she was alone on her shelf in the dormitory, and the night silence was broken only by the distant sighs and the breathing of sleeping children all about her, she had a feeling that one day she might remember what she never did remember.

As though from afar she heard echoes of things she used to know.

'Be kind my little one,' said the Herr Doctor. 'In a world that is full of dark unkindness, love is a lamp. Love should be the weapon with which men arm themselves, but instead they make guns and bombs, and worse. Too late one learns these things. Guns settle nothing.'

'I don't suppose I shall ever have much to do with guns,' said Lisa, mildly. She was trying to boggle up a large hole in the pants of the little boy no one could understand, patching them with a piece of sacking.

'That,' said the Herr Doctor sadly, 'was what I thought, once.' And then he squared his shoulders and straightened his back and said, 'Never mind. What has gone has gone, and no one can bring the past back. It is with the future we must now concern ourselves, and this message I give you. Be brave. Have courage. When the time comes to make a decision, do what is right. Do what you have to do, and be persuaded by no man. Listen only to your own conscience. The frog can become a prince. The muddy lane that looks as if it went nowhere, often leads to fame and fortune and the broad highway. With trees, and cherry blossom white like snow and woods full of lilies of the valley. With little silver fountains that play in the sun. And the broad and easy path,' said the Herr Doctor, regarding his hand without fingers, 'well, it does not get one where one fancied at all. But I speak to you in parables, my child. Maybe you are too young to understand. Take your chance when it comes. Maybe that is what I try to say.'

'What if it never comes?' said Lisa, for it was a thought that had haunted her often enough of late. Suppose one never got out of this cold grey place?

He eyed her shrewdly. She had grown up of late. Her hair had a new sheen, and under the hideous clothes she wore, her small breasts were forming.

'It will come,' he said. 'You are not like the others. I think you are of good stock, perhaps from some fine family.'

'How can you tell!' she asked.

He smiled at her.

'As with horses, so it is with women. Those who know what to look for, my little one, they can tell.'

She had been sixteen when he died.

She thought of him often. It was a part of the memory of him that came into her dream, and set her screaming still. She had missed him in the schoolroom, and gone to look for him. He lay in his bunk in the long dormitory, and it seemed to her he had suddenly shrunk so that he was only half his usual size and she had been afraid of him, and she wanted to be gone.

He had clutched at her, shivering, holding her young warm hands in his own broken ones, looking at her as if he begged for something, as if he wanted to say something for which the words would not come. His cheeks were sunken and grey, his nose was like a pin. It was a constant shame and sorrow to her to remember she had recoiled from him. He had needed kindness, and she had had none for him.

They buried him in the common grave. If you had the ill fortune to die in the dippy camp, in you went, willy-nilly. The children used to creep up to the fence, to watch the burials on summer afternoons. They saw nothing to be afraid of, though the little ones sometimes asked, 'Why do they want to go down there into that hole, Lisa? Why? Why? Why?'

The House Mother told Lisa that long ago in Vienna the Herr Doctor had been a very famous gynaccologist. Many babies he had delivered in those other days, many women's lives he had saved, in difficult births. They had come to him, the rich women and fashionable ladies, from Paris, and Berlin, and from America, and other doctors from all over the world had consulted him, and he had written many wise books.

But his books had all been burned and his wisdom lost, and in his own hour of extremity no one at all came from anywhere to help him.

How wonderful it was to awake from dreams of the dippy camp, the crowded huts, the dirty tables, to the bright nursery she now shared with little John Brown in the house in Charles Street, London, W.1. Sometimes she could not believe her good fortune. She had a bed with white sheets all to herself, and the sheets were changed weekly. She had her own cup-

board and a chest of drawers (though she had not much to put in them). She had little John, who loved her, to replace the poor little boy she had loved, but never been able to talk to, in the dippy camp. She could talk to little John. Long before her English was very good, he could understand what she meant. He was a large, healthy, bouncing little English boy, and he used to put his arms round her neck and press his small damp mouth into her ear, and whisper draughtily :

‘I love you, Lisa. I love you better than Mummy, better than Daddy, better than the cat, or Mrs. Stitch or Mrs. Ramsbottom and when I grow up I am going to marry you.’

His mother loved him, only she didn’t have much spare time.

Mrs. Brown, wife of the Commandant of the local Regiment, had come to the dippy camp two years back, when they were going back home to England, to look for a children’s nurse. She had in mind exactly what she wanted, a large, fat, kindly German woman who would be so eternally grateful for being given a home that she would stay with them for ever—or at least until she was too old to be of any further use. She had looked with distaste at Lisa who came to the House Mother’s office when sent for, with no idea whatever what it was all about.

‘I wanted someone who could speak English,’ said Mrs. Brown. In her own mind she thought, The girl is too young, and far too pretty. ‘I wanted someone much older,’ she said.

‘I have plenty of old ones,’ said the House Mother sadly, ‘but they are riddled with T.B. Lisa is the best I can offer. She is a good girl, wonderful with children. Moreover, I want to give her her chance, to get her away. She is a girl of good family. One can see it, though we do not know her story. We don’t get many of her kind. In this job we learn soon to spot them at sight. Take her. You will not regret it.’

Mrs. Brown thought she would.

‘If you take her, I shall miss her greatly,’ the House Mother continued. ‘She is a leader. The children love her and obey her. Also she is extremely healthy, untainted by what so many who come to us become tainted with.’ And as she said it, she sighed.

Lisa understood nothing of all this. She had been sent for to go to the Matron's office, but nobody had told her why. She looked shyly at Mrs. Brown, and wondered about her, for it was obvious she wasn't a dippy.

'Well, I don't know,' said Mrs. Brown, going over the pros and cons in her mind. Health, of course, was everything. The girl looked healthy enough, only much too pretty. She eyed Lisa and Lisa stood with hands meekly folded and eyes cast down, like a small slave in an Eastern market place, awaiting a bidder.

'This is an English officer's wife and she would like you to go to England to look after her small son,' the House Mother said in her atrocious German, speaking very loud. She was English herself, and she always spoke very loud when addressing a foreigner for she had an idea it helped them to understand what she was saying. 'You will have to try and learn English very quickly if she takes you. I have told her what a beautiful *Handarbeiter* you are, and how useful you can be. Would you like to go to England with her?'

Lisa nodded enthusiastically and said, 'Yes. Yes,' to show that she had already made a beginning. She had never thought of herself as a children's nurse, but in that moment she remembered the Herr Doctor's words as clearly as if he had risen from the communal grave and poked his head out of the hole and shouted them to her. 'Have courage. The narrow muddy lane leads to the broad highway.'

Mrs. Brown took her, but continued dubious.

'The poor child looks half starved,' said Major Brown, a kind man.

'If she goes on eating at the present rate, she will land herself with a bilious attack,' said his wife sourly.

For the first time in her life Lisa saw food well cooked and nicely served. It started in the restaurant car on the train that took them back to England. Great sausages, buns, and lumps of butter. Hot soup and cakes and biscuits, and you could have any of it. As much of it as you liked. It was a wonder she wasn't sick, but she wasn't. She felt wonderful, though the belt of the old black skirt she wore was suddenly tight.

From the train window she saw the world and it seemed to

her too beautiful to be borne. Green trees and fields of golden flowers. 'Oh,' she cried pointing to them in a frenzy. 'Oh, oh.'

'Good God,' said Major Brown amused. 'Has the girl never seen a buttercup before !'

Mrs. Brown said, 'I'm afraid she's little more than a savage.'

'The first thing you'll do, is buy her some decent clothes,' said Major Brown, amused. 'We can't go round with a tattie-boggle.'

Lisa, with little John clasped in her loving arms, sat gazing bemused at the fields of Kent from the train window. Hop poles, and little lost villages, and oast houses, sunset bathing the lot in rich limelight. Mrs. Brown regarded her with narrowed eyes, and again the feeling came over her that she had made a terrible mistake. The girl was far too pretty. Even wearing those terrible clothes, the black cloth skirt, tubular coat and old woman's hat, and those dreadful black shoes trodden down at the heel, she had an air of distinction. Like someone in fancy dress not hers at all.

'Well, we must hope for the best,' said Mrs. Brown, resigned.

Little John loved her from the start, and that at least was a blessing. He wasn't an easy child. They had had trouble enough with him over nurses before now. Moreover Lisa was willing and helpful, ready to turn her hand to anything. Everyone liked her. Even Mrs. Ramsbottom and Mrs. Stitch, the daily women, who had been more than dubious about a foreigner, took to her and carried her up endless cups of tea, and soon handed her on several of their jobs to do.

Mrs. Brown bought her a cheap grey coat and skirt, with a black wool jumper, and stockings and shoes. She also fitted her out with underclothes after she made the shocking discovery that Lisa had none of her own. And she bought her white linen overalls to wear in the house, so that the girl would not get ideas above her station but would realize her place. Lisa thought the overalls the most wonderful things she had ever had, for in all her life she had owned nothing white. She would have liked to wear them indoors and out. Her gratitude for all these things was touching. She was excited as Cinderella

going to the ball the first time she put all her new clothes on. Mrs. Brown wasn't touched, only impatient. She never liked the girl, and it was useless pretending. When she gave Lisa her first month's wages, very much less than an English nurse would have demanded, Lisa stared at the amount astounded, her lips quivering.

'But—I get this? As well as food and clothes, money too?'

'Wages. *Arbeitsgeld?*' said Mrs. Brown impatiently.

Lisa wept.

'Good grief, the girl's an idiot,' Mrs. Brown said. 'I know we shall live to regret ever having brought her over with us. I should never have allowed myself to be over persuaded.'

'You make up your mind too quickly,' said Major Brown. 'She seems all right to me.'

Men, and a pretty face, thought Mrs. Brown bitterly. They are all alike!

All the same she had to own that on the face of it things were going rather well. Little John had never been so happy and contented, or so good. He stopped sucking his thumb and twiddling a lock of hair on his forehead, in the maddening way he had once had. His table manners improved. He became amenable and obedient. It was obvious the girl had a knack with children just as the House Mother said she had.

Lisa took little John up Charles Street every day to play in the Park. The Park was still a fairyland of enchantment to Lisa, with its green grass, and beds full of flowers. It wasn't like work to her to have to go there. It was a real treat. Festive dogs tore round, ready to make friends at any moment, and when she and little John played games, other children came and joined in. There was a day in early autumn when for the first time Lisa met a dahlia face to face. She stared at the dahlia and the dahlia stared back at her, and the children gathered round, laughing at her.

'Goodness, did you never see one of them before?' they cried, for what were flowers to them, whose lives were full of them.

'I never did,' said Lisa—and how they all laughed.

On the green grass in those late summer days, they played new games. 'In and out the windows'—and 'I wrote a

letter to my love,' and 'What's the time Mr. Fox,' Lisa enjoyed them as much as any of the children. She was seventeen now, but she had never played games on green grass before. Then home to a wonderful tea, with toast and chocolate biscuits, and as the autumn days closed in, a fire all of one's own to sit by.

If somewhere there was a heaven better than this, Lisa did not want to go to it.

It was a luxurious house, the nursery full of motor cars, tricycles, toy railways, model airports, and all the other playthings of a well-to-do home. Only the domestic situation was uneasy.

Daily women came and went, and someone was always being caught out at something or other. The present two, Mrs. Stitch and Mrs. Ramsbottom, though they had been there some time, weren't settled. They were uneasy. They took advantage, as well as other things. At 6 p.m. punctually they departed having been preparing to do so, on and off, since five. Who got the dinner or washed the tea things they left in the sink, they neither knew nor cared. It was none of their concern. Off they went bold as brass taking with them half a plum cake.

Mrs. Brown would reluctantly tie on an apron and cook the evening meal herself, slamming the knives and forks angrily on to the table, for she wasn't domesticated. For several months Lisa had secretly watched her, envying her with all her soul for the bright saucepans, the shining silver, the pretty table mats that were all hers. One evening she appeared timidly at the kitchen door just as Mrs. Brown was wrestling with a haddock.

'I can do,' she said.

That was indeed a let-off. Gladly Mrs. Brown handed over the fish kettle, and gave Lisa the cookery book.

Laundries costing what they now do, most of the personal washing was done at home. Lisa coped with her own and little John's but Mrs. Brown resentfully ironed her husband's shirts and such of her own personal washing as Mrs. Ramsbottom could find a moment to put through the wringer.

'I—can do!' said Lisa standing shyly by the ironing board, half afraid of a snub. She needn't have worried. Mrs. Brown showed her how to work the thermostatic control on the iron and left her to it.

'My dear, that girl of yours. What a treasure!' said the Vicar's wife. 'You don't mean to say she made this cake?'

Mrs. Brown supposed Lisa was a treasure, but she still did not like her. At the back of her mind she had the feeling that Lisa wasn't really trying to help. She was weaving her way in. Afterwards it pleased her to remember she had felt like this. 'I always knew,' she said. 'From the start I never trusted her.'

In the meantime life ran smooth beyond her wildest dreams. For one thing, Lisa never wanted a day off. She was generally supposed to have Thursday afternoons, but more often than not she forgot it and took little John to the Park as usual.

'What I do—all alone!' cried Lisa, spreading her hands. Pretty hands, she had. Long and slender and slim.

'Go for a walk, look at the shops,' said Mrs. Brown.

Now and again Lisa went, but she always came home for tea.

'Why she doesn't get as fat as a pig, the amount she eats,' Mrs. Brown marvelled. Lisa didn't get fat. She only rounded up a bit and lost her pinched middle-aged look and the anxiety lines on her forehead, and acquired two utterly enchanting dimples one each side of her cheek. At nights when little John was asleep she would sit over the nursery fire, and study the cookery book. Mrs. Brown had an expensive cookery book with pictures, showing you how the finished article ought to look. When Lisa could not follow the text the picture showed her all she needed to know.

'Good heavens, Nellie. . . . Have you imported a chef?' asked the Vicar's wife. Mrs. Brown said nothing at all, she just smiled her little enigmatic smile, and hoped the Vicar's wife would think she had made the *vol-au-vents* herself.

She began to do a little entertaining now, from time to time. Small dinners for four or six, a thing that had been quite out of the question under the régime of Stitch and Ramsbottom.

'Amazing the way that girl has come on,' said Major Brown. 'I don't get half such a good dinner at the Club. Better take care, or someone will lure her away from us.'

'She knows when she's well off,' said Mrs. Brown.

'Anyway let's give her a really decent Christmas present this year. We pay her so little.'

'Don't go spoiling her,' said Mrs. Brown.

To Lisa those years in London were an enchantment and a delight. She saw for the first time trees turn golden and red with autumn. There had been no trees in the dippy camp. Only telegraph poles. She saw London Town all gay and decked up for Christmas, almost too lovely to be borne. Major Brown took her with little John to a pantomime.

She worked hard at her English, so that presently she could write reasonably well, and read the daily papers. She learned the words of songs and nursery rhymes by heart from John's gramophone. 'Lavender's blue, dilly-dilly' and 'London Bridge is falling down' but she thought that one terribly sad.

Little John started his lessons at a kindergarten. She took him there every morning, and fetched him back, arriving early so that she could get a look at them doing lessons. Learning to count and their first letters. Sometimes nowadays John went out to take tea with a friend, for he was getting very grown up, being five. Then Lisa would explore London, but only such places as she could arrive at on foot. She wasted no money on fares. In the two years she had been with the Browns she had spent no money except on a stamp to send a Christmas card to the House Mother, and a sixpence for an old man who stood singing a song in the gutter one spring day. For some reason he reminded her of the Herr Doctor. Maybe because he, too, had some fingers missing.

Apart from those isolated extravagances, her entire wages were intact. She kept them knotted in a handkerchief and hidden away under her mattress in her bedroom. Lisa did not know of any other place to hide money.

She explored the side streets with their enchanting shops. Hat shops, flower shops, sweet shops. Wonderful things to buy on every hand, but Lisa never thought of buying anything. Such things did not seem to be for the likes of her.

'She's a real little miser, I can tell you,' said Mrs. Brown. 'God knows what she's saving up for.'

'For security,' said Major Brown.

Mrs. Brown was going through her letters. Mostly bills as usual, but there was one with a twopenny halfpenny stamp.

'Steve's in town,' she said.

'Aha,' said Major Brown, deep in his paper and not really listening.

'Sailing next month for Burma. Attached to the Embassy. Embassies springing up everywhere it seems, like mushrooms. I'll ask him along to dinner before he goes.'

'Uffu. . . . Do. Nice chap, Steve. Got messed up a bit in the war, didn't he?'

'He's all right now. The plastic surgeons made a wonderful job of him. You'd hardly notice.'

'I bet Stella's sorry she stood him up,' said Major Brown. 'I bet she wishes now she'd waited a bit before going off the deep end like she did. Old Steve is really quite a good catch for a girl these days.'

'Don't be so common,' said Mrs. Brown.

'I'd like to see the old fellow again. Isn't there some nice girl we could ask?'

Mrs. Brown said, 'No.'

She had no intention of getting involved with anything like that. She knew where that sort of thing led to.

TWO

IT was autumn. For Lisa the years were passing much too quickly. Now as she wandered about London, waiting to fetch John from his school, or on shopping errands for Mrs. Brown, she began to notice people as well as places. She knew the Vicar and his wife by sight, though they never recognized her. She knew the mistresses at John's school, kind women who always spoke to her very loud the way the House Mother had done. Lisa did not mind in the least. She was accustomed to it. She was on friendly terms with the butcher, milkman, and a man who came from time to time to sweep the chimneys, as well as Mrs. Ramsbottom and Mrs. Stitch who were still there, partly because Lisa did so much of their work for them they thought they might not strike it so lucky again.

There were other people, too, in her life. Not that she actually knew them, but she watched them and made stories about them. At the top of Charles Street there was a house that fascinated her. Over the door of it was a beautiful carved and coloured plaque of a peacock, and from the balcony there hung a scarlet flag spotted with a few stars.

'It's the Burmese Embassy. That is the Burmese flag, and the peacock is the national emblem of Burma, as the lion is of England,' said Mrs. Brown. They were driving by on their way to John's dancing class, and Lisa, though she longed to do so, did not like to ask any more questions. Mrs. Brown had little patience for a lot of answering. Lisa had no idea what an Embassy was, nor could Mrs. Ramsbottom or Mrs. Stitch enlighten her. All they did was look at one another, suck their teeth, pop another sugar lump into their tea, and say, 'Search me!'

From then on for some reason the big slightly ramshackle house had a great fascination for her. She always started her afternoon off by walking past it. Sometimes the door would open and out would tumble short very sunburnt men. They were all slight and looked oddly boyish, and they would look at

her half shyly, and hurry by. What attracted her to them was that they were always laughing. In England, she had come to notice, people did not laugh very much. Grim they were, and most of them seemed bowed down with trouble, in spite of their beautiful country that still seemed to Lisa like heaven. The dark little men had lots to laugh at if seemed. One of them she noticed more specially, she did not know why. Maybe because he looked delicate. A charming gentle face he had, and a smile that revealed a beautiful gold tooth.

She singled him out at once. The others all looked alike to her, but he looked at her when he passed her, half wistfully, so that she felt in some way they had this in common, that they were both of them in a foreign country, amongst strangers. She day-dreamed, making up stories about him. He was a Prince in his own country. Or maybe he was a Frog Prince, like the Herr Doctor had spoken of. Waiting for some golden princess to give him a kiss of love. A stranger like herself, in a strange country.

One day she met him in the pouring rain. There was a good deal of rain in England, and it came on at any moment. She did not mind since Major Brown had given her a mackintosh for Christmas. A beautiful mackintosh, golden yellow and a hat to match. 'You're mad,' Mrs. Brown had said angrily. 'As if the girl wasn't spectacular enough already, without that.' But Lisa didn't know.

She was wearing her golden mackintosh when she met him rather suddenly round a street corner, face to face. He was jingling some keys in his pocket, and singing to himself, quite loud, all alone at the top of Charles Street. This struck her as so funny she burst out laughing, and so did he.

She went home that day feeling that here in the great city in a strange land, she had a friend of her own.

Thursday was her afternoon off, and as John had gone out to tea with a friend, Lisa planned to go window shopping and fetch him later in the evening on her way home. She kept the grey suit Mrs. Brown had given her so spruce and neatly pressed that it looked much smarter than Mrs. Brown's own custom-made coat and skirt. Mrs. Brown was standing in the hall as the girl

came down. She had objected to Lisa going about hatless and provided her with a small grey beret. Unfortunately it made the girl even more arresting. Mrs. Brown was conscious of the old flood of impatience and dislike filling her heart as she watched Lisa come down. Lisa smiled at her shyly.

'I go for a walk, please,' she said.

Mrs. Brown bit a finger. 'Oh. I'd forgotten it was your afternoon off. Are you doing anything in particular?'

'But no. Not if you wish it,' said Lisa, anxious only to be useful and obliging. Uneasily she sensed that Mrs. Brown did not like her and unhappily she wondered why, convinced it must be some fault in her.

'As a matter of fact, I'd forgotten,' said Mrs. Brown momentarily thawing a little before the girl's good nature. 'I'm having some people to dinner. A cousin of mine who is just off East.'

'Naturally I shall stay.'

'Game, and something nice for sweet, I thought,' said Mrs. Brown, turning away and hating herself for feeling mean.

'An apricot meringue, I think, would be good. And so easy. I can do it.'

'Very well. And for your walk, you might go to the shops and get me two brace of grouse. And don't be back later than six, if you're going to make the sweet also.'

'By six. That will be easy,' said Lisa.

She liked the summer evenings in the Park well enough, when there was always some new flower coming out, and children to play games with and festive dogs ready to run after anyone's stone or ball. Then there was music, and lovers holding hands under the trees, and amusing ducks on the water—and sitting on a chair under the trees watching all these things was almost as good as the pantomime to which Major Brown had once taken her.

Now it was winter. Winter was different. It wasn't so good. The darkness came early. The headlamps of cars were like the eyes of great animals bearing down on her. On winter evenings she did not care to be out alone.

She turned into Charles Street on her way home with the grouse, the parcel swinging from her cold fingers. She would

take the grouse back, prepare her sweet, and then fetch little John from the house next door but one.

As she turned the corner by the Burmese Embassy she saw at once that something out of the ordinary was happening there. Lights blazed from every window, sending their cheerful message out into the dark street. In the pool they made on the pavement a small group of sad grey-looking people had collected out of curiosity, anxious to see anything there was to be seen. Lisa joined them, her heart thudding with an odd excitement, she could not say why.

A large motor car drove up, and as if at a given signal the door of the house was thrown open, and light streamed out like a golden flood, giving the watchers on the pavement in the cold a glimpse of another world.

Surely, thought Lisa, swallowing hard, this was fairyland. For there came from within the sound of gay laughter and voices, and distant tinkling music of a kind she had never heard before. She could see tall candles brightly coloured, scarlet and emerald and saffron, burning in gold candlesticks, and standing on the doorstep to welcome the important visitor getting out of the big car, she saw the boy she had come to know so well by sight. His kindly gentle face was alight with pleasure. He wore, instead of the European suit in which Lisa usually saw him, clothes of such magnificence that their beauty turned her quite giddy. A rose silk shot petticoat was knotted round his slender waist, a white silk jacket had golden buttons, and on his head he wore an apricot silk headscarf, artfully knotted so that the two ends hung down one side of his head.

Behind him in the great lit hall, Lisa could see rank upon rank of women beautiful and colourful as flowers in the Park flower beds in summer and in spring. They too wore coloured silk petticoats, and their shining black hair was dressed high, with flowers tucked into it.

'Coo! Pretty, ain't it!' said a voice beside her, and Lisa turned and saw a tired-looking woman in a mud-coloured mackintosh, leaning forward to look. 'You have to have some beauty in your life,' said the mud-coloured woman wistfully. Then the door shut, and the picture was gone and the enchantment faded. Lisa turned away. The sharp needles of early

snow whipped her face and she remembered Mrs. Brown's dinner party and the grouse and John waiting to be fetched. And the apricot meringue. But the glory of that bright vision went along with her, and her eyes were still shining, her breathing quickened, and her face flushed, when Mrs. Brown came in and saw her tying her apron on. It was an apron planned for Mrs. Ramsbottom, and it went twice round Lisa and still there was some over.

Mrs. Brown gave her a gimlet look.

'She's been meeting a man!' she thought angrily. She knew the look. Now that Lisa had plumped up a little her dimples were more alluring than ever. Her hair had a new sheen on it, and she had curves in all the correct places. Of course there would be men! I should have got her a black dress, Mrs. Brown thought. That grey was a mistake. Far too becoming. And I must stop her wearing that red ribbon in her hair. Most unsuitable. Still, this wasn't the moment for fault finding. I'll speak to her tomorrow, and perhaps a plain black dress for Christmas, mused Mrs. Brown. Aloud she said, 'Listen for the front door bell. I am going up to change. It will be a Mr. Fairfield.' And she added, 'Don't stare at him when you see him.'

Lisa looked surprised.

'Why should I stare at him, please?' she asked mildly and wondered had she stared at somebody some time, and was that why Mrs. Brown did not like her at all?

'Oh well, he was badly damaged in the war. He was an airman and he crashed and had a very badly damaged face. The doctors made him a new one, and I believe it is quite good. I haven't seen him myself since. He's been abroad. People who have had that happen don't like to be stared at.'

Lisa said meekly, apologetically, 'But of course.'

Steve had grown accustomed to his face, since he had to shave it every morning. He was aware that the plastic surgeons had done a truly marvellous job on him. People in restaurants no longer looked at him covertly, and then looked quickly away. Or worse, so obviously did not look. He had been through all that, and it was over now, and he had come out the other end of the tunnel, able to pass unnoticed in a crowd, though not one



would ever have guessed the handsome boy he had once been. Now he was just another rather plain man with a curiously shaped nose, in a world full of men with curiously shaped noses. He no longer thought about it. He no longer even thought very much about Stella. That, too, was over and done with. A page turned, a story ended.

Tall, distinguished looking, and well dressed, he rang the bell of the house in Charles Street, and waited, prodding the stones idly with his excellently folded umbrella, and wondering why on earth he had ever arranged to come and dine with the Browns. He secretly thought his cousin Nellie a tiresome, cantankerous woman, but then, he knew he was no real judge of women. He had made one bloomer, and he kept away from them with a defensiveness born of a determination never again to be hurt as he had once been hurt.

He devoted his whole life, now, to his work. He was doing very well indeed. His appointment as diplomatic assistant to the Rangoon Embassy pleased him. In six weeks' time he would leave England, and its grey streets and grim looking people, for four years. Four years of sunshine, and colour, and warmth. The prospect was a pleasant one. Meantime he was staying at his club in town, putting his affairs in order, and getting his outfit for the tropics. On an impulse he had telephoned Nellie. He almost wished now he hadn't. He looked forward to a dull evening, and a poor dinner. Derek was a good chap. It would have been a far better idea to ask Derek to dine with him at the club. However, that good idea was born too late, for the door opened.

He looked up and saw Lisa, her cheeks flushed, her eyes still bright with the memory of that earlier fairyland. She had hastily removed her too large apron, and wore a red ribbon, Alice in Wonderland fashion, in her bright hair.

'Please come in,' she said, and he noticed she had that greatest of all feminine attractions, a low soft voice. The girl who did typing for him in the Foreign Office, had a voice like slate pencil working hard on a slate. His spirits rose suddenly, and he was glad he had come. Mostly the people he met at the Browns were dreary beyond words, but for once, it seemed, they had a pretty girl on tap. There was nothing to show she wasn't

a fellow guest, and as he made polite conversation in the drawing-room with the Browns, and a Colonel that Derek Brown had imported with him from the War Office, he sipped his sherry and waited hopefully for Lisa to come and join them.

She did not come. The minutes went by. The Colonel was incredibly boring about his past life in Dihra Dun. Steve had an odd sensation of the evening petering out on him, of something gone amiss the way it so often did for him, killing his fondest hopes.

'Who was it opened the door to me?' he asked, as Derek refilled his glass. 'A pretty girl with a red ribbon in her hair.'

Mrs. Brown looked up at him sharply.

'That's John's Nannie. An Austrian girl. We brought her back from Germany with us. She was in a displaced persons' camp near Berlin. It was taking a bit of a risk and I'm never quite sure. . . .'

Her voice tailed off. I must speak to her tomorrow about that red ribbon, she thought.

Major Brown said heartily, 'She's a damn' good cook.'

She was certainly a good cook, thought Steve. The grouse were done to a turn, the bread sauce delicately flavoured as it seemed to him he had not tasted bread sauce flavoured since he was a boy. The potato chips were crisp, not cold and soggy, and the sweet, he thought, must surely have been bought ready made from some fashionable food shop.

'This is Lisa's apricot meringue. What do you think of it?' said Major Brown.

There was a serving hatch in one corner of the dining-room, through which the food came from the pantry. All he saw of her was two slender hands that handed in and took out the dishes. Steve sat crumbling bread, oddly troubled and astonished at himself. He wanted to see her again. It was years since he had wanted to see any particular woman again. He never gave them a thought. He had hardened his heart, since his crash and the affair of Stella, telling himself that marriage and all that sort of thing was not for the likes of him.

He had been engaged to Stella when he crashed. He could still remember his mad, sick longing for her, and the feel and the

nearness of her, as he lay there in the hospital, burned almost beyond all recognition, the wreck of the gay handsome young man he once had been.

They had sent for Stella, and she had come. He could still recall the lift at his heart when he heard the door open, and knew though he could not see her, that she was there.

But Stella could not take it. She had screamed when she saw him, and then he heard the door slam, jarring him where he lay. The sound of her feet running down the long stone passage had haunted him in his dreams for many a year, but he had got over it now. Only it wasn't the sort of thing a man was going to risk happening to him twice.

A strange thought haunted him that here was a girl who would not run away. She had probably seen worse things than a burned airman. After dinner he worked the conversation round to the displaced persons' camp and tried to find out some more about her.

'Old Steve was quite bowled over by Lisa,' said Major Brown later that night, after the guests had gone.

'Mark my words, we'll have trouble with that girl yet,' said Mrs. Brown angrily.

'Well, don't go looking for it, old girl,' said Major Brown, yawning and untying his tie. 'Steve's really a darned good looking fellah, in spite of that crash,' he said, peering at his own face in the glass.

'He's a crashing bore,' said Mrs. Brown.

All the evening Steve had been distraught. He had found it hard to take much interest in the dull conversation of the Colonel from the War Office, and his Cousin Nellie had always been one of those women he had the greatest difficulty in listening to. He was glad when the time came that he could reasonably and politely say he must go. He would not own even to himself, how much he wanted to see the girl again. Maybe she would be outside when he got his hat, but she wasn't, and he closed the door behind him and stood for a moment looking up at the stars, cross and nervous and restless, and furious with himself. He stood there, poking at the cracks in the pavement with his excellently folded umbrella, not sure what it was he was waiting for, but with the unpleasant conviction filling his heart that he

had missed something. Something important. Something that mattered desperately.

And as he waited, he saw her again.

She was down in the basement kitchen of the Browns' house. The blind was up and he could see right in, the table laden with dirty dishes she was stacking in the sink under the window. She had tied on an enormous white apron that was several sizes too big for her, and her arms were wet and shining with soap suds white like sea foam, and as she worked she sang softly to herself.

Steve stood looking at her, his mouth dry, his heart thudding. What's wrong with me, he asked himself angrily, aware of a wild and shaking emotion he had told himself he would never feel again. Every instinct he had sent him the urgent message, 'This is your chance of happiness, your golden moment, your perfect rose. . . .'

He pulled himself together, fighting the madness. What's come over me, he asked himself angrily. It was the unnatural life he had been leading, of too little recreation, and too much hard work and celibacy. He felt furious with himself that the sight of a pretty girl seen for a moment only could do this to him, set his knees trembling, and the sweat bursting out on his brow. All for little John's nannie ! He stabbed at the pavement angrily with his umbrella, and turned and walked away into the darkness. At his age, to run the risk of making a fool of himself ! He removed his hat and passed his handkerchief over his forehead. He told himself he was well out of that, and in his secret heart, knew that he was not out of it at all.

Meantime, her work in the kitchen finished, and everything shipshape and tidy, the stoves made up and the reluctant cat shot out of doors, Lisa had gone up to the night nursery. She put a check duster carefully over the lamp, so that the light from it would not disturb sleeping John. She stood for a moment looking down at him, her heart soft with love. He slept with the dewy untouched look of childhood, his soft mouth slightly open. What a wonderful thing, she thought, to have a child like this of one's own. It could happen to a woman when she got married—but not for a moment did Lisa suppose that such a thing could ever happen to her. The fact that you came out

of a dippy camp set you apart from the rest of mankind, she firmly believed, and to date there had been nothing happen to her to disillusion her.

His small socks lay on her dressing table, waiting to be mended and she picked them up and sat down and dæ ned them, going in her mind through the happenings of the day. You must not mind his face Mrs. Brown had said, but indeed there was nothing to mind about his face whatever. He was, she thought, the tallest man I ever saw, and also the thinnest and in a way there was also something about him a little forlorn and lost, and she thought how she would have liked to take his face between her hands and say to him, 'It is a good face. Never mind.' But perhaps he did not mind anyway. Men should not be beautiful, she thought. They should fight and not heed the wounds, as the Herr Doctor had said, and obviously the long thin young man had been one who had done this.

She put him out of her mind, as she put the idea of marriage and a child like little John all of one's own. Such things were not for her. Not for a girl from a dippy camp. What she had to do was remember all she had, and thank God for it. Good food, nice clothes (though her grey suit wasn't really very warm for winter). Clean sheets, wages, and a fire to sit by. Oh yes, what she must do was count her blessings, not think of the things she had not got.

She day-dreamed, remembering the glimpse she had had for that one magic moment, into the colour and lights and music of the Burmese Embassy. Supposing, dressed in a rose silk *loungyi*, a flower in her hair, she had been one of the guests? A wild, silly idea struck her. She put the mending basket away, and let down her long thick hair. Mrs. Brown insisted she kept it twisted up into a neat bun, even on her afternoons out. Now on an impulse, she dressed it high, smoothing it into a coronet the way the Burmese ladies dressed their hair. Mrs. Ramsbottom had once kindly given her a cotton rose culled from Mrs. Brown's waste paper basket. Lisa had thought it very beautiful indeed, and she treasured it amongst her handkerchiefs. She found it now, and stuck it in her hair, and turned this way and that, admiring herself. When in came Mrs. Brown.

‘What on earth do you think you are doing?’ she asked.

Lisa snatched the rose from her hair and took out the pins. Her hair fell all about her like a dark silk cape, mercifully hiding her scarlet cheeks.

‘I was—only playing,’ she said.

‘Playing. . . . What next. . . . For goodness sake get to bed, girl. I’ve told you again and again your light must be out by ten.’

‘But by ten today I am not finished washing up. I am still in kitchen,’ said Lisa tearfully. Mrs. Brown looked at her with narrowed eyes.

‘Are you sure you haven’t been out talking to Mr. Fairfield?’ Lisa’s eyes grew round with astonishment.

‘With Mr. Fairfield? How can I talk with Mr. Fairfield? I—I do not know him.’

Mrs. Brown did not believe her. Something, she felt sure, was going on. Artful, the girl was, and the sudden glow and the way she had blossomed out boded no good. And now all this dressing up of a sudden!

‘Mark my words, we’ll have trouble with that girl yet,’ she said to her husband at breakfast next morning.

‘Cross your bridges when you come to them,’ said Major Brown.

The shops were all decked out in their Christmas glory, and every walk became a delight and an adventure, everywhere there was something new and exciting to see. From her upper window at nights, her face pressed to the cold glass, Lisa watched other girls going by, beautifully dressed, to parties. And she and little John would wander bemused, hand in hand, window shopping, or visit the great store near by that had suddenly become a wonderland of toys and crackers.

Now church bells pealed through the frosty air. Well up-holstered clergymen hurried from fashionable house to fashionable house, and stood huddled like waiting crows at fashionable front doors. They did not go down the areas much. Lisa knew the one from the church round the corner very well by sight. He often dined with the Browns and praised her cooking, but he never recognized her again when he met her in the street.

This gave her the feeling that the London God was another of those luxuries not for her. Not interested in persons displaced through no fault of their own.

The church was beautiful, with white flowers and mistletoe and holly, and in one corner one of the devout ladies of the neighbourhood had arranged a little set piece—The Manger, and Joseph and Mary, and an electric torch artfully arranged in the manger, making a glow that was supposed to represent the Holy Child. It seemed a very strange idea to have an electric torch there instead of a baby, and Lisa stood looking at it so long that the Verger came and looked at her suspiciously.

‘No touching, now,’ he warned her.

‘I look only,’ she said proudly.

‘We lost a torch the year before last,’ said the Verger. ‘I got to look out.’ And then he relented a little, and said, ‘Foreign, aren’t you? Amazing lot of foreigners round these parts now. You’d be surprised the number that comes here to church.’

Perhaps it wasn’t only displaced persons the London God was not interested in. Perhaps it was foreigners of any kind. Perhaps even her unknown friend, the boy with the gentle face, was also an outcast. It made another bond between them.

‘See. . . . I go,’ she said, and she laughed spreading out her hands. ‘And I do not steal your Holy Child which is an electric torch.’

‘Well, there it is. I got to be careful,’ said the Verger, all the same feeling a little sorry. He could not say why.

A week before Christmas, Mrs. Brown missed the pound note.

She remembered quite well going upstairs and taking it out of the tin cash box where she kept the housekeeping money, before she went to have her hair done. Just as she came downstairs the telephone rang. She slipped the note under the Chinese vase on the hall table, and went into the library to answer the phone. She was surprised to find it was Steve. He seemed to be paying them a good bit of attention, she thought. He seemed oddly jerky and nervous, and she couldn’t imagine what it was he was getting at, till he asked her outright if he could come to dinner with them on Sunday. It surprised her,

a lot, for he never went out of his way to be particularly civil when he was in town. Again that queer prick of intuition came to her, and she thought, 'Something is going on.'

Anyway, it was no good. She and Derek were going out for the day to Weybridge, playing golf with some friends of his.

'Sorry, Steve. Another day, perhaps. I'll ring you.'

He still hung on, making, she thought, rather futile conversation. Was it possible that cousin Steve was a little drunk? Hardly, she thought, at half-past three in the afternoon, and in the end she got rid of him by the simple means of putting the receiver down and pretending they'd been cut off. The telephone rang again as she left the house, Steve no doubt, renewing the connexion, and she hurried away. That was what made her forget the pound note.

It wasn't until she had had her shampoo and set and her manicure that she opened her bag, and discovered she had no money with which to pay the bill.

That was a time, for her, when so many things in her little world were out of shape. She had grown, recently, very forgetful. Hateful suspicions filled her mind, not only about Lisa. Derek came in for his share. She was sure he was having an affair with the blonde girl in his office. She was sure Mrs. Stitch and Mrs. Ramsbottom stole the dripping and helped themselves to cigarettes. She was sure Lisa was up to something behind her back, and helped herself out of little John's after lunch toffee tin.

The fact that more often than not she found the things she suspected people of stealing, hidden away by herself in peculiar places, did not register with her. Long before she got home, she knew very well what would happen. She would lift up the Chinese vase, and the note would not be there. Lisa, dusting the hall as she often did in the afternoon while little John had his nap, would have taken it. It was Christmas time, when everyone wanted extra money.

She was right. The Chinese vase had been moved. The note wasn't there. Her neck flushed in the hot unbecoming way it had suddenly taken to flushing. Her knees trembled. She felt hot and sick, and had to sit down till the thudding of her heart quietened a little. All along she had known that in time

something of this sort would happen, and now it had happened. She had been right. I usually am right, thought Mrs. Brown, when it comes to instinct about people, and for a moment her triumph almost overcame her annoyance.

It would be best to say nothing to Derek until she had some absolute proof, she told herself. Derek, like all men, so immensely tiresome when it came to a pretty face. More than once she had wondered whether perhaps he hadn't been carrying on with Lisa himself behind her back. Before she said anything to Derek, or to Lisa herself, she would wait until Lisa gave herself away. She was bound to do it in time. Presently, thought Mrs. Brown, I shall catch her with something she obviously couldn't have bought out of her wages. Goodness knows, thought Mrs. Brown, working herself up, what else she has been helping herself to.

The house was silent, empty and still, the daily women gone, Lisa taking little John for his walk in the Park. Mrs. Brown went up to the night nursery. She pulled open the dressing table drawers and looked in them. Lisa's meagre supply of clothing was carefully folded there—her handkerchiefs in a neat heap and a pound note hidden amongst them. The gloves they had given her were folded away in tissue paper. A calico rose Mrs. Brown had thrown away some time back was carefully wrapped in a piece of white paper. A folded letter pushed to the back of the drawer raised Mrs. Brown's hopes that she might be on the trail of something or other.

It was only from the Matron at the displaced persons' camp near Berlin, thanking Lisa for her letter, glad she had made such strides with her English, and was so happy in her work.

Mrs. Brown went slowly downstairs. She wasn't convinced. She just felt that she hadn't managed to discover where Lisa kept the secrets she undoubtedly had.

Christmas trees grew up in a night in the London squares and the shop windows, and sprouted gold and silver, and crimson and emerald green balls, like bright fruit. They dripped with shining chains and sparkled with bogus frost. Large glass icicles tinkled in the wind, and once when the wind got too strong a whole blizzard of bright balloons broke loose and went flying off through London Town. On the front of an Oxford

Street store, Snow White and her Seven Dwarfs bobbed and bounced and grimaced to the admiring crowds below. Father Christmas inhabited the Gents' Outfitting, complete with reindeer.

But to Lisa the most wonderful of all was the sweet shop at the corner. It had let itself go with a perfect blizzard of shining gold chains that had red roses stuck in them at intervals, and a golden coach drove through the centre from the window of which looked a fairy princess dressed in golden gauze, surrounded by boxes of chocolates the size of cartwheels all done up in golden paper and tied up regardless with crimson satin ribbon in great lavish bows.

To think there were people who bought such things and took them home, and opened them and ate the contents ! She stood, her face almost pressed against the window, her eyes shining, for so long that the icy wind began to find its way through the thin coat and skirt she wore. She had no overcoat, and the underwear Mrs. Brown had provided her with, though heavy, wasn't warm. She was suddenly aware she was shivering. Reluctantly she tore herself away from the delectable display, and made for home, taking the memory of all the beautiful things she had seen with her.

It had begun to snow a little. The cold sharp needles of it pricked her face and the bitter wind found its way through the thin jacket of her grey suit. As she turned the corner into Charles Street she met the full blast of it. It seemed to be trying to push her away altogether, and she struggled against it, her head down.

As she passed the Embassy she heard the door there open, but now she was too bent on getting home to look up. She heard a voice close behind her saying, 'Please, please . . .' but even then she did not think it had anything to do with her.

Then she saw him beside her. He wore an enormous muffler wound two or three times round his neck, and in the bitter cold his gentle face was pinched and grey. Snow had lodged in his long eye-lashes and in his thick dark hair.

'Please . . .' he said again. 'Please . . .'

In his arms he held clasped one of those enormous crimson and gold chocolate boxes she had just been looking at in the sweet

shop round the corner. The size of a bicycle wheel it was, tied with great lavish scarlet satin bows. He held it clasped against him like a life-buoy.

'For you,' he said, breathlessly. 'For a merry Christmas.' He laughed and put the great box into her arms, as she stood there too surprised to speak. When at length she found her voice she stammered, half scared.

'Oh no. . . . Please. . . . I cannot take it.'

His face fell. His beautiful wide smile with its gold tooth slowly faded out. Into his eyes came a look she knew only too well. She had seen it a dozen times on little John's face, when she told him he must go to bed and he didn't want to. When she would not tell him another story or give him a sweet, or a little love.

'Then—you do not like it?' said the boy very mournfully and he looked at the glittering box as if trying to see what there was about it anyone could possibly object to.

'Of course I like it! It is beautiful. Far, far too beautiful. For many minutes I look at it in the shop and think how beautiful it is. But it is not for me,' she said, and she tried to give it back to him.

His face brightened again.

'But it is for you. I have seen you so often and I want very much to know you and have a nice friendship with you, but there is never any chance for me till now, then I think a merry Christmas is coming, goodwill to all, and so forth, when people make friends and give good presents. Here is my chance, so I have quickly taken it. Don't you think so?'

He was so earnest, standing there in the snow. He was so kind and gentle, and in some way she could not explain, tender, that she laughed softly, touched by the honest kindness of him, holding the preposterous box of chocolates clasped against her bosom. It kept the bitter wind off her.

'That is better,' said the boy. 'I like very much to see you laugh. In England I do not find people laugh greatly, don't you find it so also? Now everything is all right between us, and you will accept the beautiful Christmas present I got for you, I hope we can become friends.'

'Well, I . . .' she began, doubtfully.

‘In a foreign country one needs friends, and I have often been very lonely,’ he said.

‘Oh yes . . .’ said Lisa, for here was something she could understand. ‘I also. This is not my country either.’

He appeared delighted at that piece of news.

‘Not really? Is that so? Which then is your country?’

She shook her head sadly. ‘That is something nobody seems to know.’

‘Never mind,’ he cried gaily. ‘Now we are friends and everything will be quite all right. A merry Christmas and I shall see you again quite soon.’

He ran up the broad steps into the Embassy again, and slammed the door.

It had been difficult enough forging one’s way against that wind unhampered by parcels. Laden with that enormous box of chocolates, it took Lisa twice the time. What fun it would be to show everyone at home. Mrs. Ramsbottom, Mrs. Stitch, they must all have their share of her wonderful piece of good fortune. She even had a picture of herself handing the magnificent box to Mrs. Brown and the Major.

‘Will you not have one of my beautiful chocolates? They were a present from a friend.’

Even after the chocolates were eaten and the box was empty, it would not be the end. She would keep stockings and handkerchiefs in it to the end of her life, and with the satin ribbon she would . . .

She had got as far as the area door as she thought what she would do with the ribbon. She pushed the door open, her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkling with the excitement of her wonderful adventure, and the fact that Christmas had brought her not just a present, but also a friend. She felt the warm blast of the kitchen fire on her face, and smelt the pleasant smell of the cinnamon buns she had baked before she went out, and set to cool on a wire tray. They still stood on the kitchen table, cooling off—one of them missing where Mrs. Stitch had carefully abstracted it and rearranged them so that nobody would know.

Mrs. Brown was in the kitchen. Not doing anything. Just,

it seemed, hanging around, waiting. She wore a look on her face Lisa had come to dread. It usually meant trouble, and in her mind she tried to think of something she had done wrong, or left undone. The first bright pleasure began to fade from the evening, as she laid the magnificent gold and scarlet chocolate box on the table, and faced her employer.

Mrs. Brown stared at the box, drumming her fingers nervously on the table as she did so.

‘Where did you get that?’ she demanded.

Lisa said happily, ‘A friend has given it to me. . . .’

It was quite some minutes before she realized that anything was wrong.

THREE

THEY were upstairs in the night nursery, a check duster over one corner of the lamp so that the light would not shine on little John. Mrs. Brown was sitting on the end of Lisa's bed. She had been sitting there for the best part of an hour, just saying the same thing over and over.

'It's no good lying, my girl. You had best tell me the truth and be done with it. You took that pound note from the hall and spent it on that ridiculous thing.'

Lisa sobbed quietly, 'But I didn't. I tell you I didn't.'

'I know very well you had the money. You don't expect me to believe you can afford to buy expensive things like that, out of your wages.' She was on the point of saying, 'Your miserable wages'—but she stopped herself in time. She gave a venomous look at the chocolate box lying on the bed. Lisa looked at it too, but now it had lost all its glamour and charm for her. She felt she hated it and wished she had never seen it.

'I did not buy it. I have told you. A friend has given it to me.' She added, with an enormous sob, 'For a merry Christmas, he gave it to me.'

'Then kindly tell me who this friend is, so that I can verify it and prove your story,' said Mrs. Brown, and into her thoughts came the idea 'Steve. . . . Don't tell me that Steve. . . .'

Lisa turned away, and her voice came muffled with grief and handkerchief.

'I cannot tell you. I do not know his name.'

It was quite true. She did not know his name, but she knew where he came from. She could have told Mrs. Brown that, but she wasn't going to run the risk of getting him into trouble. He had, she knew, intended only to be kind and generous. Perhaps he did not know, any more than she did, that there was something very dangerous and sinful in giving a girl a box of chocolates. No, whatever trouble had to come of all this, she would face it out alone.

'You don't know his name!' said Mrs. Brown with awful

scorn. 'Because he does not have a name. He does not exist. You are a very wicked girl. I have always had this feeling about you, and now I know I have been right. You stole the money and invented the whole story.'

Lisa moaned, speechless before the injustice of it. Behind Mrs. Brown's anger, triumph glittered in her eyes. How pleasant it is to have been right all along.

She got up majestically.

'There is not much more to be said.' That at least, thought poor Lisa, was a let-off. 'If you persist in lying to me, you will have to go. I cannot have a thief and a liar bringing up my child. Dishonesty is catching. Goodness knows what you might not teach him.'

Lisa's tears fell faster at this injustice.

'I never teach him anything that is bad.'

Mrs. Brown ignored that.

'I will give you until tomorrow morning. If tomorrow morning you will come to me and confess, tell me the truth and acknowledge that this story of yours is a pack of lies, then I may reconsider the whole business. But unless you do this, and apologize, and agree to have the money cut off your wages, you must go. I will give you a note to the Labour Exchange, explaining what has happened here, and you must get another job. Christmas,' Mrs. Brown remarked casually, 'is not a very good time for looking for another job, of course, but I can't help that. The remedy is in your hands.'

She said, as she opened the door, 'Naturally, you will not be able to expect a very good reference.'

'Lisa,' said little John, creeping as he always did into her bed in the early morning. 'Why have you been crying, Lisa? Why is your pillow all wet, Lisa?'

'I cry because now I have to go away and leave you,' she said, and at the thought of it, she started to cry again. His small arms tightened round her neck. He half choked her with the sleeve of his manly blue and white striped pyjamas. He rubbed his stubby nose against her cheek in the endearing fashion he had. Through the long days and years, what was one to do without little John, thought Lisa, shattered.

'Oh Lisa, you must not go ! I won't let you. Who says you must go ?'

'Your Mummie. . . .'

'I will shoot her. I will kill her and cut her up into small bits,' he said savagely. She caught him to her.

'No, no. You must not say that, my little one. The Mother is good and kind.'

'I will fight them if they come to take you from me,' he said, and he hit the pillow with his small fists to show her how savagely he would fight. 'Oh Lisa, I will throw my porridge on the floor and I will yell and moan, and I will not make wee-wee for anyone. . . .'

For his sake she half played with the idea of going to Mrs. Brown and confessing she had taken the money. She had plenty of pound notes hidden under her mattress. She never spent anything at all. But to do that would be to tell a terrible lie, and the Herr Doctor had warned her against lies, however temporarily helpful they might appear to be.

She stood with her hands folded in front of her, the way the House Mother had taught them.

'I am sorry. I did not do it. If I say I do it, I tell a lie,' she said simply to Mrs. Brown in the library after breakfast. 'Therefore I must go.'

An enormous sob shook her, emerging with a snorting sound, though she did her best to control it.

'Stubborn as a mule,' said Mrs. Brown contemptuously. 'Very well. You had better go and pack your belongings, and mind you don't take anything that does not belong to you. I will give John his walk this morning, and you can go down to the Labour Exchange, and explain matters.'

She scribbled a note on a piece of headed paper.

'Naturally you will have to leave behind the clothes I have given you. Your successor will need them. I can't go on outfitting nursemaids indefinitely,' said Mrs. Brown.

Lisa hadn't thought of that. She had thought of the clean sheets, the well served meals, and the warm fire in her room that would be hers no more, but somehow the matter of the clothes had slipped her mind. She opened her mouth and it was all she could do to control the wail that tried to come out of it. The

long black tubular coat . . . the old woman's skirt and darned black jumper . . . the shoes too large for her, with broken uppers. . . . Moreover, there was the little matter of underclothing. The meagre supply she had possessed had long since disintegrated into rags and been used to polish brass, and clean little John's shoes. It would mean going out into the wide world in mid-winter without any at all.

She looked at Mrs. Brown, half minded to plead with her for the underclothing. 'If perhaps you could lend them to me till I can go to a shop and buy some more !'

Mrs. Brown's back looked very forbidding.

Lisa gulped, took the note, and went away without saying anything. But no wonder when she walked down Charles Street with it in her hand, half an hour later, bound for the Labour Exchange, she was crying. Tears ran down her cheeks unchecked. It had snowed quite a lot in the night. A rich mush of it, now mixed with mud, covered the pavement. Lisa could feel it, as she walked, splashing on her stockings, and finding its way secretly down into her not-too-thick walking shoes. And all this woe and misery had come upon her for what ? Because somebody had liked her well enough to want to make friends with her, and do her a kindness, and give her a present at this happy Christmastide !

She had got as far as this when she saw him suddenly coming up the street towards her, conjured up unexpectedly out of the thin, yellowish London fog that was slowly collecting. He looked pinched and even more delicate and frail than usual in the bitter cold, and she noticed for the first time the faul-like way he moved. The clothes he wore, she realized, were not right for him. The overcoat was much too long and drooped off his slender shoulders, the black homburg hat was too large. It came down on to his forehead like a lid. How much more beautiful and suitable the rose silk petticoat, the golden scarf.

He did not see her at first, for he was hurrying, no doubt bent on getting back to the warmth of a house out of the bitter weather. He had almost passed her, when he looked up, horrified.

'You are crying,' he said. 'At this happy Christmas time when everyone should be gay.'

He drew her into the shelter of somebody else's porch and took a large fine handkerchief out of his pocket and tenderly dusted her face with it. Like somebody cleaning windows, thought Lisa, and in spite of her misery she had to laugh through her tears. Side by side they sheltered. In her soft, broken English, with many a gulp and a sob, she told him her story as best she could. She did not make it very clear. Parts of it kept getting washed away on floods of tears.

He said nothing whatever until she had finished, his gentle face puckered with horror and with surprise.

'But this is quite terrible. How ever could I know that my beautiful gift would be considered so risky! Can you not go to your mother and father and tell them the whole story so that they can explain everything? Parents are sometimes very useful. Someone should speak with this woman for your honour.'

Lisa laughed mournfully. Displaced persons do not have fathers or mothers to step in handily in the hour of need, or, if they have, do not know where to find them.

'You mean—there is no one?'

Mournfully she shook her head.

'No one!'

'This is the most terrible story I have ever heard,' he said, his gentle face quite ravaged by the terribleness of it.

'So now I go to the Labour Exchange, and I had better hurry for I must get back and cook the lunch,' Lisa gulped. 'I have to find another situation and at Christmas time it is not good to be looking. In any case, I do not think this letter will be very fortunate for me.'

She held it gingerly between her thumb and finger. She did not know what Mrs. Brown had written in it, but she could guess. He took it from her and tore it into a dozen pieces. He flung them magnificently and carelessly out to join the grimy snowflakes that had started to fall again.

'No,' he said.

'Oh dear,' said Lisa, 'I do not think you should have done that. A line is necessary for me.'

'I have got you into this trouble. I shall get you out of it,' he said. 'It is quite simple what we have got to do. You must marry me at once, and there you are. I can look after you.'

She stared at him, hardly believing she heard him aright.

'Anyway, I want a wife, and I have always thought it would be very beautiful to have you for a friend of mine. Ever since the first time I saw you that has been my good idea. You must marry me, and let the rest of this affair trickle like duck's water off your back. At the end of this month I return to my country. My country is a happy place, with sunshine, and many theatrical shows always going on, and flowers.'

She closed her eyes, leaning against his shoulder for warmth, and saw again that vision of fairyland that had appeared for a brief moment through the open Embassy door.

'My father is a rich man. He is very important, and has many good houses. He can give us one of them to live in.'

She opened her eyes, the vision of warmth and colour fading.

'You—you don't know what you are saying,' she whispered, shocked

'Indeed I know very well. I am a practical man, well aware of the difficulties, but I think nothing of them. The more difficulties there are, the better it is to conquer them. You are beautiful and kind and always I like you, but I see you with this child and I think of all the difficulties. You are rich and married and this child is yours, I tell myself.'

'I was his nurse!' said Lisa, weeping again at the thought of little John, hers no more.

He caught at that word enthusiastically.

'But this is splendid. . . . A nurse. That is exactly what I require. It is first class. I am far from strong in this country. The English climate, it is not good for me, and often my stomach is very weak and dangerous. What a good thing indeed if you are a nurse as well as not married to somebody else. This is indeed my fortunate day for now you can become my wife and my nurse, which will be most helpful.'

'Well, it's not that kind of a nurse,' she said faintly. He waved that aside.

'Any kind of a nurse will do, and in any case it is not a thing you need bother about. It is only here in England I am sometimes a little weak. At home in my own country I am very different, I can tell you. Very strong and manly—but here the wet, the cold.'

‘I do not care for it myself,’ said Lisa.

Far down the street an old man came playing a tune on a penny whistle in the hopes of wringing the odd penny from passing kind hearts on such a day. ‘Some day my Prince will come,’ he tootled, and the fantastic promise seemed to fit in with the general unreality of the morning, and to bring back to her again the Herr Doctor. One must have courage, he had said, to give the kiss that turns the frog into a prince. One must have courage. Not, she thought hastily, that the boy beside her looked in the least like a frog. They were now walking arm in arm towards Bond Street, though Lisa had no idea why, or how it happened.

‘In my country,’ said the boy, and his voice, like his face, was tender and soft, ‘it is warm and the sun shines and all the trees are full of flowers and many beautiful scents. Flamboyant trees with golden and scarlet blossoms edge our streets.’

‘Do they have any fruit?’ Lisa asked.

He looked doubtful.

‘I do not think so, but they are very beautiful. I think you will like my country. Rangoon is a beautiful city, but the place where my father lives is even more beautiful, being on the river banks up country. Very go-ahead and up to date. We are building a big electrical power station and some very fine works there, that in time will bring us a great fortune, for everyone in the district will have to pay us for the electric light we shall bring them. Electricity,’ said the boy earnestly, ‘is extremely necessary. One cannot live without it.’

‘Assuredly,’ murmured Lisa, but she thought one had managed to live for many years without it in the dippy camp.

‘It is for this reason,’ the boy went on, ‘my father has sent me home on a engineering course, but even before that I am very well educated. Science. Botany, etc., as well as many other subjects. You will like it very much. I am sure we shall have a happy time.’

He was so eager, so warmly affectionate and enthusiastic, his slim cream-coloured hand feeling for hers. She felt a warm surge of affection go out towards him, just as she had always felt for little John when he teased her for a story, or love, or a sweet. My little child, she thought, and it came to her that if she

accepted his preposterous offer, all she would be doing was exchanging one child for another child.

It was nonsense, of course. He could not possibly mean it. Ahead of them loomed the Labour Exchange, its windows warmly frosted over from the fog inside, its door opening and shutting to let in and out cold-looking people in mud-coloured mackintoshes.

'I am now here,' said Lisa in a small sad voice.

'Yes. But you are not going inside. For the first thing,' said the boy happily, 'you have no letter. What about my suggestion? It is far better. Decide. Decide. It is always wise to strike with a hot iron, now. No need to go to the Labour Exchange any longer to get another job. I give you a job. A very good job, and we will go instantly and purchase a fine ring, why not? I hope you do not think I am a poor man?' he said, and then he paused, as if the unlikely idea had just struck him for the first time, and said plaintively, 'But perhaps you do not like me. Perhaps you think I am very ugly.'

She said quickly, 'I think you are the kindest person I have ever met. Nobody has ever been so very kind to me before.'

'Then why not let me go on being kind always?' he said. 'I would always be very kind indeed to you. Far kinder than is necessary. It is my custom. Naturally I am aware you might find some of our ways and customs and manners not quite the same as your manners and customs.'

'I do not know that I have any of these,' said Lisa

'We could soon change anything you did not care about,' he said magnificently. 'I am very intelligent and quick to learn. I could give you many warm recommendations from my tutors and from the colleges I have attended, also a personal letter from our Ambassador, and from the Prime Minister.'

He watched her anxiously as he tendered all these warm recommendations, waiting for her final decision.

'If we could go somewhere warm . . . where we could sit down,' she murmured, lost.

'Naturally. What a good idea. Here is a tea shop. I also can think much better when warm, and sitting down,' he cried. Over two steaming cups of coffee they faced one another in the

tea shop behind the big window that was full of chocolate boxes and cut sandwiches and red tomatoes.

Lisa sipped the hot coffee. What, after all, she thought, had she to lose? True, she knew nothing of his country, except that it was warm, and in her mind something like the brief vision she had had that evening through the open door. But then, she had known nothing of England when she came to it first, and that had worked out all right. Until yesterday. She had known nothing of the Browns. She knew nothing of the new employers the Labour Exchange might send her to if she went to them. Courage, the Herr Doctor had said, and his voice came back to her again now, over the years. One must have courage when the moment comes. Oh surely, thought Lisa, this is the moment for me.

To get married, of course, was a bit final. But it struck her it would have advantages. Once you were married, you couldn't be sacked, your underclothes all taken from you, get sent to the Labour Exchange to try again. Maybe what he proposed was a risk, but experience had taught Lisa all life is a risk.

She took a deep breath.

'Very well,' she said. 'I will do it. But now I must hasten home to cook the lunch.'

He took her arm firmly and piloted her further down the street.

'Today you cook no lunch,' he said masterfully. 'We will telephone this woman and you can tell her you do not return till the evening. Since she will shortly have to cook all the lunches herself, what a good idea to practise.'

Lisa never thought she had the courage to do it. Prompted by him, she rang up the house in Charles Street and left a message with Mrs. Ramsbottom, to say she was very sorry, she would not be home till after tea.

'Well, fancy!' said Mrs. Ramsbottom. Pleased. Scenting trouble. Disaster is a bright flag in a dull day!

For Lisa it was the most wonderful day she had spent in all her life. They lunched in an expensive restaurant, grandly. Waiters attended them, bowing respectfully, napkins on arms. First they had gone to a fashionable jeweller's shop in Bond Street.

Lisa had been scared when the big glass doors swung to behind them. She had never been in a jeweller's shop before. The array of rings and brooches, the sparkle of diamonds, the massed formation of clocks and watches, of silver trays and fountain pens, bemused her. She clung to the boy's arm, certain that presently one of the magnificent gentlemen leaning on the shining glass counter, would come and order them out.

Far from it. They were all attention.

'I wish to buy a fine ring,' said the boy grandly. And when they saw the wad of notes he produced from his inside pocket, great trays of rings came out for them to choose from.

In the end he fixed on a magnificent sapphire surrounded by diamonds, and they left the shop in an aura of good wishes.

'Mostly I find people are very kind, do you not think so?' the boy said happily. It had not been Lisa's experience. The thought came to her that maybe people were always kind when you had a large wad of notes, but she did not say anything.

Over the table in the warmth of the restaurant, he put the ring on the third finger of her left hand.

'And now that we are engaged, and you will so shortly become my wife, perhaps it would be a good thing if we knew one another's names, don't you think so?' he said. He took from his cigarette case a visiting card. On it she read :

FRANK KHYN NYUNT

'Frank is my English name, because over here they find some difficulty with my other and Burmese name, which is hard to pronounce. It means Mr. Sincere Bud,' he told her. 'All Burmese names translated into English have very beautiful meanings.'

English names also, if you came to think of it, had meanings, mused Lisa, though they were not always very beautiful. She thought of Mrs. Ramsbottom or Mrs. Stinch!

After lunch he drove her down to Notting Hill. Regardless of expense they went all the way by taxi, though a bus would have done. He took a room for her in a small hotel where he said several of his married friends already lived.

'You will meet them later. They will all become very fond of you in a very short time. Now, there is nothing else to

worry about. We will have some tea, and then I will take you home. There is a shop near here with many cream cakes inside it I think you will like. They are coarse, but filling. I have to be careful because of my weak and dangerous stomach, but I gather you are O.K. in that direction. Now all you have to do is fix things with this woman and let me know which day you can join me and I shall fix everything forthwith. All you have to do is make a plan and telephone. The number is on the card.'

He walked to the door with her, raised his preposterous hat, gave her his sweet slow smile, and disappeared into the darkness, becoming a part of it.

Lisa went slowly down the area steps, the glamour and the happiness of that mad day slowly draining away from her. All she had to do, she thought ! It was certainly enough. She took off her hat and coat slowly. The sink was stacked with pots, for it wasn't Mrs. Ramsbottom's job to wash up, and she had stacked and left them there. Lisa tied the enormous apron round her, and filled up the bowl with water, and as she did so, the sparkle and flash of the beautiful ring on her finger sent her the comforting message that, provided she had the courage to tell Mrs. Brown she was leaving at once, she was washing up dirty pots for the last time !

FOUR

MRS. BROWN climbed the stairs up to the nursery floor slowly. The deep line between her eyebrows was accentuated into an exclamation mark. A very awkward thing had occurred. Earlier that afternoon she had made up her mind to tell her husband what had happened. The triumphant phrases formed themselves in her mind as she went into the library after lunch. What did I tell you? Haven't I said from the start?

Unfortunately before she had time to begin, Major Brown opened his wallet and took out a pound note.

'Forgot to tell you, old girl. Very sorry. Borrowed this the other day.'

He went on quickly, taken aback by the sudden blank look on her face: 'Borrowed it without asking, I'm afraid. Short of cash and happened to find it under the Chinese vase in the hall when I was going out. Would have told you but you weren't in.'

Mrs. Brown went on staring at the note in that peculiar fashion. It made him quite uneasy. She was funny tempered nowadays, and you never quite knew what she would do. So he was immensely relieved when all she said was 'Oh.'

She had closed the library door behind her and stood for a moment frowning, biting her finger, wondering what on earth she should do now. The cryptic telephone message that had come while she was out, saying Lisa would not be back until evening, might mean she had already got another job. But surely not, thought Mrs. Brown. Not as easily as that, after what I put in the letter.

All the morning she had dawdled round the Park with little John, who had been abominable. Bored and tiresome he was, and he grizzled the whole time, whining for Lisa. Lisa played hide and seek. . . . Lisa played 'What's the time Mr. Fox?' . . . Lisa played tag with him round the trees, all things Mrs. Brown had no intention whatever of doing.

How unpleasant to have to spend many mornings like this. If Lisa went there would be nothing else for it. The school

holidays stretched ahead of her like the Sahara, seemingly endless. Mrs. Ramsbottom, peeved at having to get the lunch that morning, had given a week's notice which, as Mrs. Brown knew, probably meant they would never see her again. Even before Major Brown gave her back the pound note, Mrs. Brown had been toying with the idea of being magnanimous, of telling Lisa that, as it was Christmas time she would overlook the matter.

So she climbed the stairs to the nursery floor, when she heard Lisa come in that night, in a slightly uneasy frame of mind.

Lisa was putting away her things as Mrs. Brown entered. But for the flash and glitter of that magnificent ring on her third finger, she could have believed the whole thing to have been just another game she had played, another make-believe story she had told herself, far too wonderful ever to happen to a girl from a dippy camp. But the ring was there, a constant reminder that she had not dreamt it all. She held her hand out at arms length and stared at it, and then Mrs. Brown came in.

'I have talked matters over with my husband,' said Mrs. Brown not quite truthfully. 'We have decided, as it is Christmas time, to let bygones be bygones, Lisa, and to allow you to remain on with us. Little John is fond of you and would miss you, and we both realize how difficult it would be for a girl like you to get another place, just at Christmas time—without a good reference.'

For a moment she thought, with immense relief, that the tears that filled Lisa's eyes were tears of gratitude.

'We don't want to be hard on you,' she went on. 'We will forget what has happened, and start afresh.'

'I am so sorry,' Lisa said unsteadily. 'Now it is too late. I am afraid it cannot be.'

'What do you mean—cannot be?' Mrs. Brown began—and then she saw the ring. A magnificent square-cut sapphire surrounded by diamonds, and her voice trailed away into shocked silence.

'I love little John very much. I like to stay with him,' said Lisa sadly, 'but now I shall soon be married.'

'Married! What in the name of fortune are you talking about? Who do you suppose is going to marry you?' Mrs. Brown demanded flushing crimson. For a moment the wild

suspicion burned in her mind that something had been going on all the time, with Steve. 'Who do you expect to marry you?' she demanded, hardly knowing what she said.

Lisa fumbled nervously in her hand-bag, an old one of Mrs. Brown's, rescued months back from the rubbish heap. Somewhere inside it she had tucked that card. She found it and tried to read it, but in her nervous flurry the Burmese name was too difficult for her to pronounce, and all she could do was to repeat the English translation of it that he had given her.

'His name,' she said unsteadily, 'is Mr. Sincere Bud.'

Mrs. Brown burst out laughing. She sat there shaking with it for some moments, well aware that behind her mirth tears of rage were not very far away. She had never been so angry in all her life. She felt quite sick and shaken with it. The ring on the girl's finger, so much more magnificent than the neat little emerald and ruby hoop Major Brown had given her. This was the last straw, the final indignity. Another and even more galling idea presented itself to her. Perhaps the girl had been speaking the truth all the time, and the box of chocolates had been a present to her after all. What would a box of chocolates be to someone who could afford to buy that magnificent ring?

Back in the library she paced the floor in such a state of frenzy Major Brown felt quite anxious about her. If only she would take things more calmly, not go off the deep end. She never, he thought sadly, used to be like this.

'What are we to do, Derek? Don't sit hovering there saying nothing. Some scoundrel has got hold of her, and told her a cock and bull story about marriage, and we all know where *that* will probably end. Men don't *marry* girls like her!'

Major Brown said, 'Oh, I don't know, my dear. Why not?' Which did not make matters any better. His wife stood over him, shaking with anger.

'Why not! Use your common sense, if any. He's only known her a matter of hours, as far as I can make out. And as far as I can understand he's black—a nigger.'

'No, my dear. You've got it wrong. Burmese are not niggers, and they are not black. They are a nice golden brown. Much the same shade as our bathing belles work overtime to

become. As for short acquaintance, it is not important. That is the way they do things out East. I remember one of my Gurkhas coming to me one day and asking for a week's leave as he wanted to get married. I asked who the girl was, and he said he did not know as he had not found her yet. At the end of his week I remember he returned with a charming little wife. It takes all sorts to make a world, you know,' said Major Brown, trying to give the business a lighter twist.

'You mean to tell me that you, who have always professed to be so set against mixed marriages, are actually telling me you approve and intend to do nothing.'

'No, dear. I don't approve, but I don't see there is anything much I can do. Personally, it is my opinion people are better off with their own kind. The man who spits on the floor must always feel at a loss with the man who spits out of the window, if you know what I mean, and people who bath every day are unlikely to settle down happily with those who only do it once a week. But we must face facts. Something is working itself out in the world today that wasn't there when we were young.'

He went on hastily, hoping she would calm down if he could get her to look at the affair more reasonably.

'After all, look at it from Lisa's point of view, dear. She has little to lose. She has no home, no people of her own, and no very bright future anyway. Not even any clothes, apart from those you got her. If the fellah can afford a magnificent ring, he is probably a man of substance, and will do her pretty well. And after all, the Embassy is always the Embassy.'

The memory of that ring revolved in Mrs. Brown's mind and now it was large as a catherine wheel, slowly revolving and emitting sparks.

She burst into tears.

'She must go. I won't have her in the house another day. She isn't fit to be looking after our child. I knew from the start it would never be a success. I told you a dozen times.'

'You did, my dear. I know you did. But I don't quite know what you are going to do, over Christmas, with nobody.'

'I don't care. She must go.'

Major Brown sadly lit a cigarette.

'She is a jolly good cook,' he said, and he sighed. 'I wouldn't

be in too much of a hurry. Give her a day or two. She might change her mind.'

To her immense surprise, Lisa found herself now the centre of interest. All kinds of people who had never before paid the slightest attention to her, called on her. The Vicar came and asked her whether she had been confirmed and suggested she joined a youth centre. And a woman in a flat hat whom Lisa had never seen in her life before, arrived down the area steps one afternoon as Lisa was making mince pies. Lisa had finally agreed to cook the Brown's Christmas dinner before she left them for ever.

'My dear child, you do not know what you are doing,' said the woman in the flat hat. 'You cannot realize what it means to marry a man of different race, manners and customs, to say nothing of colour.'

'In the displaced persons' camp where I spent my childhood,' said Lisa, 'there were children of every kind and colour. For many months I share my bed with a small negro girl whose customs were also not my customs.'

The woman in the flat hat shuddered, but persevered.

'We have made various enquiries on your behalf, for my society looks after girls like you,' she said, somewhat to Lisa's surprise, for she had never seen her before. 'This man Khyn Nyunt—Frank as I gather he is called in England—has no doubt painted a glamorous picture of the East for you, but believe me, those of us who have been there—and I have been there—know too well that it is not glamorous at all.'

'I do not think he has painted any pictures,' said Lisa patiently, removing a tray of mince pies, like golden puff balls, from the oven. 'Only he has told me there are flowers on the trees.'

'There are untold discomforts.'

'So also in Charles Street, when the wind is cold and the clothing is thin,' said Lisa, and she thought what a strange thing it was that the shining ring on her finger gave her such courage and confidence. She wasn't afraid of any of them, any more.

'You will find yourself cut off from your own kind entirely. You will be very unhappy.'

Lisa shut the oven door and got to her feet. She faced her

visitor in the glorious aroma of mince pie. There was about her a certain cool dignity that made the woman in the flat hat feel vaguely uncomfortable and at a loss.

Here also I have often been very lonely,' she said, 'where all the people are of the same colour as myself.'

Just for a moment the woman in the flat hat had felt acutely uncomfortable. For an instant her conscience smote her. She knew she had not taken much trouble over this lost sheep. Indeed, until Mrs. Brown rang her Society up on the telephone she had never heard of the little Austrian girl who had lived for two years in Charles Street, and it struck her suddenly that she ought to have known. Lisa was beautiful, with a calm still beauty the woman in the flat hat seldom saw in the Society women and the professional do-gooders amongst whom she worked on committees planning bazaars, organizing balls. It wasn't exactly what she had set out to do, and suddenly she remembered the girl she had been, and her own great hopes and high ideals of the work she would do for the brotherhood of man.

It hadn't worked out quite like that. She knew in that brief moment of clear seeing, that she was now fonder of knocking at front doors than descending area steps. She loved the society gathering, the well-filled table. Looking at Lisa's calm, cool little face over the heaped tray of mince pies, she knew this, and knew too, sadly, that tomorrow she would forget she had ever known. She was middle-aged and tired. She had to eat. There was Lady Mockridge's musical party at 8.30 that night. . . . Useless to deny it, she felt more at home upstairs in the drawing-room where Mrs. Brown was biting her fingers, and awaiting her.

'Did you manage to get anything out of her?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'Stubborn as a mule,' said Mrs. Brown. The woman in the flat hat sighed, 'She seems, considering her background, a young woman of some character. But I shall not leave it there. I shall try and have a word with the young man himself. It will not be pleasant, but I feel it is my duty to pursue the matter. Thank you. . . . Perhaps half a cup. . . . And these delicious madelines . . . home-made, I suppose? Dear me, she is certainly quite a cook!' said the woman in the flat hat, thinking of the mince pies.

So fortified, she made her way to the Embassy. The visit

was not as unpleasant as she had feared, and the well turned phrases of reproach she had prepared were never used. For Frank, confronted with the Society's official card, had a shrewd idea what it was all about. So he locked himself in the W.C. and sent a Burmese friend down to tell the visitor he had gone away to Nottingham.

Mrs. Brown refused to see Lisa to say good-bye. She went off to Enfield for the week-end to her mother, and took little John with her so that when Lisa came back from doing the morning errands at the shops on that her last day, she found the nursery empty, and little John gone. She stood for a moment trying not to cry. She had bought him a parting gift, a little box of brightly coloured chalks and a drawing book. She parcelled them up and laid them on the table beside his bed with a little note that said 'With love from your Lisa.' Then she neatly folded and pressed the grey suit, the black jumper, the heavy but not warm underclothing, and laid it on the bed for her successor. She put on the old black clothes she had arrived in England in two years previously, and left the house without seeing anyone. Never again would she walk down Charles Street, hand in hand with little John capering beside her. It had needed all her courage to take this final step. Nothing is so hard to bear as sudden change, even if it is for the better.

The door had hardly clanged to behind her, when the telephone rang. Major Brown was alone in the house. He awoke out of a pleasant doze to answer it, and found it was that cousin of his wife's ringing up again. Queer chap. They had nothing of him for months, and then all of a sudden he seemed to be for ever on the line. Could it be, Major Brown wondered, that he and Nellie were having a little affair? Passionately he hoped they were, for he felt it would do her a lot of good. Anyway, here was this chap once again asking if he could come to dinner on Friday.

'Sorry, old boy. Matter of fact, Nellie's away for the week-end, and I'm having to feed at the club. Come and dine with me there, if you'd care to, but it won't be very exciting. We've had a bit of a domestic upset here. Lost our excellent little cook. Yes. Yes, that's the one. Austrian girl we brought back with

us from Germany two years ago. Bad show. Went this morning. No. Not to another situation. Matter of fact, she's getting married. . . . Yes—that's what I said.'

He thought it very odd of old Steve to ring off quite so abruptly. Without as much as saying cheerio! Almost as though he had fallen off his chair.

Meanwhile Lisa was waiting in the hall of the Burmese Embassy, looking at an enchanting model of an oil well in a glass case in one corner. Presently Frank came running down.

'I am sorry. I am not very smart today,' she faltered, and she hoped he would not look down and see her broken shoes. Frank laughed gaily. He did not seem to mind in the least.

'The first thing is some shopping, I think,' he said. He sent a friend to fetch him a taxi.

Lisa had never been inside any of the big stores before as a customer. All she had ever done was window shopping, and an occasional visit to a children's outfitters, or the food department for Mrs. Brown. She clung to Frank's arm, overawed by the splendour of it all. She wasn't accustomed to it. She wasn't accustomed to being treated with such beautiful courtesy and when he stepped aside to open the door and let her in first, she almost fell over him.

At first the sales-ladies were inclined to be snooty and off-hand, noting Lisa's terrible clothes. More than once Lisa saw them smiling behind their hands, and she burned with mortification. Frank, however, was blissfully unconscious of them, enjoying every moment.

'Always I have wished very much to do shopping, but I never had anyone to shop for,' he said, and to the sales-lady who stood waiting, slightly scornful, he said, 'This lady will become my wife at any moment. It is therefore necessary for her to be very splendid, so please will you assist us to achieve this? At the moment nothing is very suitable.'

Somehow, before his simplicity and utter guilelessness they thawed out one by one. The news went round that he was a prince in his country.

'I want only the best,' he told them, and their hearts warmed

to him, for the wad of notes he produced proved he could pay for it.

He bought gossamer underwear, and boxes of sheer silk stockings. Cashmere twin sets, he bought her, and fringed wool stoles, and he insisted she change there and then. Heads of interested women poked from changing rooms to look. Assistants came from other departments to have a look at this odd couple, as Lisa cast from her for ever the shabby old clothes she had brought from the dippy camp.

'It's like a fairy tale,' said the sales-ladies. 'Cinderella before our very eyes. There's nothing like a nice bit of romance for brightening up the day, dear.' She went on to persuade Frank to purchase an expensive fur coat.

He paid cash for everything. They were bowed out of the store in great style.

'Now it is time for some food,' said Frank.

He took her to a smart restaurant in St. James's Street. The waiters there looked a little surprised as they entered arm in arm, but they, too, were soon won over by Frank's beguiling friendliness, and Lisa's obviously expensive clothes, and beautiful sapphire ring.

It was a happy day. The momentary sadness Lisa had felt when the door of the Charles Street house clanged behind her, had soon dispersed. She was enjoying every moment.

'Eat, eat,' cried Frank grandly, 'anything you want. As for me, a little boiled fish, I think.' He consulted the waiter. 'Do you not think that would be a good thing for me? My stomach is very dangerous.'

Lisa sat back on her brocade chair, and looked about her. The day had taken on a dream-like flavour. She could not quite believe all this was true. Instead of the dreary clothes she had donned that morning she wore a soft cherry-coloured wool frock with a silver belt, her long hair braided and dressed high in the fashion Mrs. Brown had forbidden, because it made her look too striking. Striking she certainly was, finely built like a pedigree yearling, and more than one person turned to look at her, astonished at her freshness and her beauty. But Lisa when she met their eyes, looked away quickly, for she thought they only looked at her because she was with Frank. That was one of the

things the lady in the flat hat had warned her about. 'How will you like being stared at, and pointed out wherever you go?' It was, Lisa told herself, something she would have to get accustomed to. She did not care. She did not love the kind gay little man who tomorrow would be her husband, but as she looked across the table at him, where he sat solemnly picking at the plain boiled fish with white sauce that the kind head-waiter had so warmly recommended, her heart was filled with gratitude towards him that was not far from love.

Frank paid his bill from that imposing wad of notes that to Lisa never appeared to shrink at all, however much he took from it. Then he slipped his arm through hers and they left the restaurant together.

'You see how everyone stares at you because you are so beautiful. How fortunate I am, and there is everybody else noting it,' said Frank, with his soft laugh. She gave his arm a little squeeze, glad he was pleased. Certainly everyone in the restaurant was regarding them with interest. She looked about her, smiling a little from sheer happiness, and suddenly and unexpectedly saw a familiar face. At a table in a corner sat Mrs. Brown's cousin, Steve Fairfield, whose face Mrs. Brown had told her not to mind. He had been hurt and mended and patched up and she would never have noticed anything different about him, if Mrs. Brown had not said that. She remembered she had liked him, and day-dreamed a little foolishly about him, and the memory brought a sudden swift colour to her cheeks. He was looking at her, but his gaze was blank and not at all friendly, and she told herself he would not be very likely to remember her, little John's nurse, whom he had only seen once, and for a brief moment as she opened the door to him. He would never know she had wanted to take his broken face in her two hands, and say, 'Never mind'—because somehow she had sensed he wasn't happy.

He did not look at all happy now, sitting there in his corner, but she decided sadly it had nothing to do with her. He did not belong in her life, and then Frank came and took her arm again, stuffing change into his wallet, and said very loudly and possessively 'Come along, my darling. Some more shopping now, I think.'

They went out together.

Steve got up unsteadily. The shock of it was so sudden and unexpected that for a moment he thought he was g^oing to faint. He had spent a miserable day thinking about her, wondering in a frenzy of misery and regret where she had gone and who it was she was marrying—and suddenly there she was. Beautifully dressed arm in arm with a Burmese boy with a pleasant, gentle face and a European suit several sizes too large for him, in which he would never look quite right.

A vein throbbed painfully beneath his wounds, and his mouth was dry. All the wild plans he had made during the morning, of finding her somehow and taking her away by force, faded and died, and he knew that was the end of it. She was out of his reach for good. The haunting and day-dreaming, the constant nagging longing and desire would have to stop. Thank goodness there was only a week left before he sailed for Rangoon. There was nothing for it but to put her out of his mind. Maybe it was better that way. Anything else might have led to disillusionment and heartache, as his one other love affair had done. He no longer trusted Fate.

He could not eat the excellent lunch he had ordered for himself. Loneliness swamped him suddenly like a rising tide. He paid his bill and went out into the street, trying half crazily to persuade himself it wasn't the same girl he had seen, only somebody like her. He wandered round the shops all the afternoon, in the vain hope of seeing her again, and proving to himself that he had been wrong. Presently the fog came down, which rendered his hopeless task even more impossible. There was nothing for it but to forget the whole wretched stupid affair. Maybe, he tried to assure himself, he had been prevented making a proper ass of himself anyway. Their lives had joined for a brief moment, and parted again, and now they went in different directions. He would never see her again.

The last four days in London were the most wretched he ever remembered. Worse by far even than those bandaged days in hospital. There at least he had achieved a certain sort of peace. He wandered about London, alone and restless and miserable, with the feeling of an opportunity missed, a chance of happiness gone for ever. A door closed on a landscape so sunny and beautiful that the thought of it drove him half crazy.

FIVE

IN the dippy camp such religious instruction as they had had, had been dolloped out wholesale, like the soup. God, it had always seemed to Lisa, had been as rushed and busy as the House Mother, with so much on His hands He could not be expected to answer the prayers of a lot of displaced children. Still, they had prayed just the same. Give us this day our daily bread—and somehow it had come, though it wasn't particularly appetising.

In the dippy camp no one had much time to tell you anything, but it was funny how, in some queer way, you knew. She still remembered how the Herr Doctor one day before he died, had taken out his watch. A slim gold watch, very beautiful, his one most treasured possession that he had managed to keep with him against fearful odds.

He had pressed a spring and the back flew open displaying the tiny springs and wheels and shining jewels within. All working and pulsating as if it was alive.

'What would you say,' asked the Herr Doctor, 'if someone told you that nobody made this? That it just, somehow, came about.'

'I would say,' Lisa had replied solemnly, 'that was a very stupid thing.'

The Herr Doctor shut his watch with a snap and slipped it into the pocket of his tattered waistcoat.

'A very stupid thing. Yet in your day you will meet people, my child, who will tell you there is no God, and that the world, that is so much more wonderful than a watch, managed somehow to come about all on its own. That, too, will be a very stupid statement, and never forget it.'

So, even though God had not had much time to bother about her in Charles Street, W.I., she often thought about Him, and now that the time for her marriage had arrived, she did not feel the registry office service was enough.

It had been so dusty and impersonal, with a charlady called in to be a witness, and a whole row of people coming on behind

them waiting to sign the same forms. Like buns, thought Lisa, waiting to get into the oven. She had a longing for something a little more ceremonious, and like the wedding a girl had dreamed about.

'But naturally, if that is how you feel. I can fix it,' said Frank. 'Nothing will be more simple.'

There was something very comforting in the way he could fix anything she wanted.

'I am naturally a Buddhist, but not, I fear,' said Frank with a sigh, 'a very good one. With us the marriage ceremony is not a religious one. It is between a man and a woman and a few friends, as you might say a social occasion, but it is very quick and pretty and I think you might like it.'

So, in the afternoon, they were married again and with more ceremony, according to the Burmese custom, in the drawing-room of the little hotel in Notting Hill Gate. For this occasion one of the Burmese ladies lent Lisa a gold silk *loungyi*, a little white chiffon jacket with diamond and ruby buttons, and an orchid to stick in her hair.

Frank, also, put on the magnificent clothes she had seen him in once before for that brief moment when the Embassy door had opened on a party there. Facing one another, both a little shy, they joined hands in a bowl of clean water. Then Frank gave Lisa a red rose, and she gave him a white carnation, and they announced to the assembled company that they were henceforth man and wife.

'That is all. It is very simple,' said Frank gaily. 'If the marriage is not a success, to undo it is just as simple. No trouble at all as is the custom over here. But we very seldom do it.'

After that several of Frank's friends from the Embassy made appropriate and lengthy speeches, which, since they were in Burmese Lisa could not understand.

'They are wishing us great happiness and many children,' said Frank, beaming. He was enjoying himself, happy as a child at a pantomime.

After that they all got into different motor cars and drove off to the wedding feast.

Frank had hired a private room for the occasion.

'Everything must be very splendidly done,' he said. The

table was decorated with flowers and laden with exotic dishes. Curries and sweetmeats, prawns and chickens, eggs and vegetables, were piled high on silver dishes, the whole feast in the capable hands of an Indian gentleman in a turban. The hot, sweet pickles were handed round, the whole washed down with cold sweet champagne. It was the sort of banquet Lisa had often dreamed of, but never thought she would have a part in, least of all a leading part. As bride, she sat at the head of the table, the friendly little Burmese ladies on either side of her loading her plate with tit-bits of food.

Lisa ate sparingly, a little here, a little there, trying everything for the fun of the thing, but only eating a very small amount of each of the dishes.

Frank, unfortunately, was not so wise.

Down the table Lisa observed him more than once, with some misgivings. It seemed impossible that one human frame could contain the large quantities of food that were heaped on his plate. Once she said tentatively to the large lady beside her whose name she did not know :

‘ Frank should perhaps be careful.’

‘ It is his wedding day,’ said the elderly lady gaily. ‘ On wedding day everyone eats heavy food. Never mind.’

After the feast came the musicians, and strange were the tunes they wrung from their peculiarly shaped instruments. From his seat in a corner of the big sofa Frank beamed at her.

‘ How do you like our music ? ’

Above the tinkle and whack Lisa said timidly she was sure she would learn to appreciate it in time.

And then the feast was over. The musicians packed up the thumb drums and the saing-wain, and went home. Lisa and Frank drove off in one of the Embassy cars lent for the occasion, to the Savoy Hotel. All smart honeymoons, he assured Lisa solemnly, started there.

‘ And we must be very smart. You shall put on your most beautiful dress tonight and I will wear my formal, and after dinner we shall dance in the restaurant. Once I dined there with our Ambassador and there was dancing, and many beautiful women but none as beautiful as you. I have since taken six dancing lessons. So I am very proficient and know everything

about modern dancing. Everyone will watch us and think of me 'Lucky chap. . . . Lucky chap.'

It did not work out that way.

All that day Frank had ignored his dangerous stomach, but it did not ignore him. Almost as soon as they got to the hotel it turned on him and wreaked an awful vengeance against the chicken curry and pickled brinjal, the sticky rice and fried prawns with which he had regaled it earlier in the day.

For a moment Lisa really thought he was going to die. White-faced and terrified she telephoned down to the hall and begged them to send her a doctor. What was to happen to her, she wondered terrified, if she lost her one and only friend so soon.

The doctor was middle-aged, tolerant and kind. If he was surprised, as he followed the extraordinarily beautiful girl bride into the bedroom, to discover who her husband was, he did not show it. Maybe he had reached the age when nothing surprised him any longer.

Tenderly and gently he examined the moaning Frank, and then rejoined Lisa in the little sitting-room of their expensive suite, where she stood nervously knotting her handkerchief.

'It looks to me very like an ulcer, my dear. He tells me he has had trouble before.'

She nodded. 'The stomach is dangerous.'

He suppressed a smile, and went on. 'He should go on a diet and lead a very quiet life for some time. I'll send you a diet sheet.' He hesitated for a moment, and went on, 'I understand you have only recently been married.'

'Today,' said Lisa with a sob.

'Postpone the honeymoon, my dear, till he is stronger. Plain food, early bed, rest and quiet and no excitement of any kind. You understand? He tells me you are sailing for Rangoon almost at once? The rest aboard ship should do him good. I'll send along a tonic and the diet sheets. See he lies out in the sun. And no spiced foods or alcohol.'

Lisa said with breathless relief:

'Then he will live?'

The doctor smiled reassuringly. 'He will probably live for a very long time.'

Drugged by the doctor's potion, Frank slept. Now and again

he moaned a little in his sleep. Little John had moaned just that way, in the night nursery of the Charles Street house, after an unwise tea party. He had felt urgently for her hand from time to time, as bogies born of too much rich plum cake pursued him. Frank felt for it in just the same fashion, and clung to it like a life-line when he found it.

'What a sad time I am giving you, and this our wedding night,' he moaned, in one of his lucid periods. 'You must not become disheartened with me, for this will pass, and you will find me very manly and strong.'

'I shall not become disheartened with you,' she assured him.

'You will soon see. I am very sporting,' he promised her.

She was happy enough organizing his plain meals, packing for him and making arrangements for their departure. The Embassy people were kind and thoughtful. A friend of Frank's, whose Burmese name translated into English Frank told her meant Mr. Long Awaited, came daily, and saw about their luggage and tickets and transport.

My little child, thought Lisa, as she covered Frank tenderly at night with the bed clothes, and sat beside him holding his hand until he fell asleep. She was happy. How much more she now had than she had ever dreamed of. They drove to the station to get the boat train in a handsome limousine. Pinned to her expensive fur coat she had a beautiful orchid, a present from Mr. Long Awaited. In her hand she carried a magnificent box of chocolates, which Frank had got for her before his unfortunate collapse, saying, 'These you will find are not at all risky like the others were.' (She could still not look at an expensive box of chocolates without a shiver running down her spine.)

Now was added to Frank's discomforts the misery of seasickness for he was a poor sailor. And added to that, there was the shattering indignity of it.

'You will think I am always sickly,' he moaned, while Lisa bathed his suffering forehead with eau-de-Cologne. 'How kind you are to me, my dear one. How fortunate and unfortunate am I. But I think you will soon despise me.'

She comforted him with brave words.

'As for you and your stomach, you feel nothing?' he moaned.

'Nothing at all,' she said, and was too considerate to tell him the sea air merely made her hungry.

The ship rolled all the way down the coast of Portugal. The sea was a blue blind drawn monotonously up and down over the port-hole. Frank lay with closed eyes, not venturing to look at it. The coats and dressing-gowns that hung on hooks on the walls, swung there dismally in and out, like a row of corpses. The suit cases advanced from time to time from beneath the bunks, and then retreated again, as if performing the figures of some intricate dance.

Lisa enjoyed every moment of it. The ship, with its white scrubbed decks, spotless paint, and pink funnel, was a fairyland to her. She longed to explore it, to sit out in the pale sun that fell all about the decks like weak lemonade, to feel the spray that dashed over from time to time, against her face. Shyly she watched the other passengers, mostly still in the cocoon stage, prone and greenish--swathed in rugs.

Frank was so shattered meantime that she had no heart to leave him for long, and spent most of her day in the cabin. Her meals she ate alone in a dining-saloon that had many empty tables. No one save Lisa appeared to be hungry. She went early to bed at nights after tenderly tucking Frank into his bunk with a shawl.

Little by little she got the ship's geography worked out. At the far end of the decks was the bar and smoke-room in which a number of red-faced men sat for ever drinking. After one scared look through the window, Lisa avoided it carefully.

'For there was someone there, very drunk. And at eleven o'clock in the morning,' she told her husband, shocked, 'I don't think that is very nice.'

'You can see how it has been difficult for us to accept such men as our masters,' said Frank, but he felt too unwell to continue the subject.

The ship's doctor, kind and fatherly, visited them daily. In other days the idea of such a marriage as theirs would have shocked him profoundly, but now like many others, he had had to reorganize his ideas, and he found the story of the little girl from the displaced persons' camp being rescued by this boy with a gentle face, and apparently plenty of money, somehow oddly touching. What, he wondered, would happen to her when she

got to his country, where everything was so very different, and her own position would be somewhat doubtful?

Later he discussed it with Steve Fairfield over a drink in the bar. Steve had been sleeping badly, his nights haunted by nightmares of the past, and he had gone to the doctor for sleeping pills.

'Girl I knew did the same thing. Married a Burmese,' said Steve gloomily aware that the very thought of Lisa now somewhere on her honeymoon made him feel physically sick.

'How did it turn out?' the doctor asked, interested.

Steve shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know. I lost sight of her.' The best part of ten days had gone by before he had any idea she was on board. She spent most of her time in the cabin, and he spent his in the smoke-room. They had passed Gibraltar, where the cold nip had gone from the air, and the wind blew warm and soft from the east, with a promise of things to come, when he ran slap into her in an alleyway. She was carrying a cup of soup and some biscuits on a tray down to Frank in the cabin. Since the ship had got a little steadier, his dangerous stomach had steadied also.

They stared at one another, both too surprised to speak. It was a complication Steve had not for a moment dreamed of. He cursed himself now, wondering how he could have been so stupid. There are few ships that go direct to Rangoon. Since Burma was where the boy came from, there was nothing surprising in his travelling back there by sea. Fool I was, he thought, not to go by air, and he stood there speechless, glaring at her so angrily that Lisa began to laugh. At first she had thought he could not possibly recognize her, but now she was quite certain he did, though she had no idea why it should make him cross.

'So you got married,' he said.

She nodded. 'Yes. Unfortunately my poor husband has been very sick, but now I think he is a little better again.' And she added half timidly, 'Perhaps later we shall see you?'

Steve went back to his cabin and sat on his bunk, appalled. This was a turn of events he had never dreamed of. He had faced the worst, and made out his plan of campaign. He had settled down to a spell of serious reading during the voyage,

which he hoped was going to help him to forget the whole desperate business. He had hardened his heart and put her out of his mind.

And here she was. As he had stood for those few moments talking to her, he was half afraid she would hear the thudding of his heart, and now all the old avenues of conjecture opened up again and forced him to explore them. If, instead of walking away as he had done that night, he had gone down into the kitchen and talked to her, it might have been him she was travelling with now, all her bright hair and the soft whiteness of her. There is a tide in the affairs of men, he thought, that taken at its flood. . . . But he had not taken it, and here he was. Alone, and wretched, sleepless from bitter remorse and aching regrets. While a little way down the alleyway, she was sharing a cabin with somebody else. Dearer and more beautiful and more desirable even than he had thought her at the start.

Wild, stupid hopes filled him for a moment as he sat there. The fellow was sick, had been sick for more than ten days. He tried to recall just what the doctor had said about him. No physique and probably ulcers. He might die ! But as soon as he had thought it, Steve felt ashamed.

He contemplated the situation as dispassionately as he could. He loved her and he wanted her desperately, and she had married someone else. And somehow for the next three weeks he must manage to control his feelings and be civil to the damn fellow and see them around together day after day, and be haunted by the thought of them together night after night. And until they got to Rangoon there was no respite from it.

Steve lit a cigarette, aware his hands were shaking. He had never in his life been afraid of anyone before. Now he knew that he was desperately afraid. Of himself.

SIX

WRAPPED in his old aloofness and solitude, sourly Steve surveyed his fellow passengers. There was a highly coloured lady they called Aurora whose laugh, like a horse's whinny, echoed over the ship. She behaved as though her virtue was of the easiest, but when the men wished to push the matter to its logical conclusion, how affronted she was, how disgusted by their lack of respect.

Around the ship's bar, eternally, sat those red-faced souls who for some reason seem lost at sea without a glass in their hand. Mostly they stared sadly into space. They did not appear to be enjoying themselves—rather to be contemplating some distant and awful fate. There was a managing woman, nicknamed the Battleaxe, who spent a lot of time telling the Captain how to run his ship. Her husband, a kind mild man, had a cabin to himself, far away from her, an arrangement that seemed odd at first sight, but was soon understandable. One other advantage he had. He was deaf, and wore an aid. When with his wife, he would make a single remark, and then cut himself off.

Steve was particularly concerned with this lady, because night after night, in his misery and his wretchedness, he was constrained to be an unwilling witness to her toilet. He had the cabin next to her, and cabin walls are thin. She was a noisy undresser. She released four suspenders one after the other, like bows speeding arrows on their way, and he was not unaware of her nightly wrestle with her girdle. One by one she deposited shoes, like someone laying foundation stones. From time to time, although alone, she made the odd remark. Probably practising a *bon mot* for tomorrow. He recognised the clank with which she deposited her denture in a tumbler. Hair pins fell like spent shrapnel on the glass dressing-table top, and then came the rebellious protest of the bed springs, as she laid her down to rest.

Steve got to timing his movements by her. When she stirred her early morning tea, which she did with the vigour of one wielding a pestle and mortar, he got up and went on deck,

thankful another night was over. He abandoned all pretence of working. He could no longer read. He put his chair on the deck where he could watch the companionway, in case Lisa appeared. It was mad and it was dangerous, but he could not help it. Sometimes other passengers approached him, trying to lure him into their organized games. Sometimes the woman they called Aurora would prance towards him with girlish cries :

‘Cheer up, dearie. . . . Come and have a quick one. You can’t be mournful for ever. . . . There are just as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it, you know.’

He looked at her gloomily. He longed to say, ‘Yes, but they are all cod or mackerel,’ only he was too polite. Aurora was better than the Battleaxe, for at least she was kind hearted. He dreaded the punctual attentions of the Battleaxe who would bring her chair and anchor beside him, regaling him with the names of titled friends and important occasions in which she had taken a leading part. From that it was but a step to ship-board scandal and rumour, and when she had finished, nobody had much character left.

When finally Lisa and her husband appeared on deck, the Battleaxe was all agog.

‘Now what do you make of that?’ she asked. ‘Of course she married him for his money. I hear he comes of an extremely wealthy Burmese family from somewhere up country, but I ask you. . . .’

Steve turned on her then and glared at her.

‘Madam,’ he said, ‘I mind my own business.’

The Battleaxe said icily, ‘Oh, of course. If they are friends of yours. . . .’ She departed, he hoped for good.

Friends of yours ! The words had a bitter taste. Out of a corner of his eye he watched them farther down the deck. The weather had grown warmer now that they had passed Perim and entered the endless blue expanse of the Indian Ocean. At long last the boy had emerged from his cabin, grey and pinched, to lie in the sun, with Lisa in constant attendance. She brought him food from time to time and watched him anxiously as he ate. More like a mother with a child, thought Steve, his throat aching.

'This is Mr. Fairfield, of whom I have already spoken to you,' Lisa said shyly, as Steve paused beside their chairs. 'He came to Mrs. Brown's house once when I was there.'

Steve towered over the boy, took the cold slim hand in his, and politely hoped he felt better. He wondered just what it was Lisa had told her husband about him. Though he was obviously very weak and pulled down, the boy seemed in excellent spirits, and Steve made another discovery. It was impossible to dislike him. That guileless friendliness that had defeated both headwaiters and sales-ladies, worked on Steve also.

'For some time I have indeed been in low estate,' said Frank, 'but now I am much better. The stomach has recovered somewhat and is no longer so weak and dangerous, though I fear I shall not be up to deck games. This is a pity for I am extremely good at them, on outward voyage having won both skittles and deck tennis. Unfortunately the English cold and damp has made me for a time a little weak.'

There was something entirely inoffensive, somehow almost touching, in his boastfulness. It was a child's hopeful approach to life, full of gusto, and in spite of himself Steve had to smile. Frank looked at the books under the older man's arm.

'Ah. I see you are studying Burmese. Excellent. I shall have great pleasure in giving you the Burmese lessons daily. It will be very splendid for me to do so, and pass the time, and it will be agreeable for you also, because I am a first-class teacher. Daily I teach my wife many things.'

It was the last thing Steve intended, or wanted, but there was no way out of it. Daily his deck chair was anchored alongside theirs, and he spent the morning listening to Frank's soft sing-song voice propounding for both of them the intricacies of the Burmese language. It was impossible not to like the boy, he was so patient, so incessantly good-humoured, so convinced nobody could possibly wish him anything but well. Appalled by the impossible situation he found himself in, Steve tried to concentrate on Burmese grammar, and not look at Lisa, or the shadow her long lashes made on her cheeks, or the pure oval of her small face cupped in her hands.

And now, all against his will, he found himself their official champion on board, against the gibes of the smoke-room, against

Aurora's heavy-footed wit, and the Battleaxe's malicious digs. Added to this was a constant fear that sometime, somehow, the truth of his feeling for Lisa would leak out, the way these things do, and his wretchedness would become another topic of ship-board gossip and chatter.

Was she happy? Did she realize the sort of life she was going to? Would she ever stand it? Through the long nights when he could not sleep, he lay turning all these things over in his mind, listening to the slap slap of the sea against the ship's side, and the passing hours tolled by the ship's bell. At least, he thought, I shall be in the same land there if anything should go desperately wrong for her.

She seemed devoted to her strange little husband.

It would, Steve came to realize, have been far better if he could have hated the boy. It would have been easier to bear if Frank had not made plain his immense admiration for Steve.

'I would like so much to have been tall and handsome like you are,' said Frank wistfully one day. 'Unfortunately that cannot be done. All my people are mainly very small, though my father is six foot, fortunate fellow. Most unusual with us, I can assure you. But though small we are very strong. I too, when I get back into my own country, will be strong and courageous again. Kindly be seated, Mr. Fairfield. There is something I wish to say to you if you do not mind.'

Steve sat down on the foot-rest of Frank's deck chair.

'Well,' he said roughly. 'What do you want to say?'

'It is about my wife.'

Steve's heart missed a beat. Had the thing he dreaded happened, and the ship's chatter already started going round, Had the boy heard it, and guessed his feelings for Lisa and intended asking him not to see her any more? The thought of so preposterous a situation brought the sweat in sudden beads to his forehead.

It was soon obvious that there was nothing of the sort in Frank's guileless mind.

'My wife,' he said, 'is a good and very beautiful girl as I am sure you know, and naturally she is very much above me in every way and I was indeed fortunate to find her. Only, on account of my poor health she has had a very dull time indeed

since our marriage. Sick, sick, nothing but sick, which is not at all gay. I think you will agree.'

Steve sat regarding his own knotted hands, in his relief finding difficulty in not laughing out loud.

'No proper marriage, and not much of a honeymoon to date,' Frank went on. 'Every since we are married the poor girl has been little to me save a hospital nurse, a duty she performs with great skill. Now, tonight, I see on the notice board there is to be dancing and some gala. Naturally in my low state I cannot very well dance with my beautiful wife, thought I have taken six lessons and am very proficient, knowing all the steps. In London I have bought for her many glorious dresses which she has had no opportunity to wear. So this is the favour I ask of you. Tonight will you please be a little gala and dance with my beautiful wife, and she shall put on one of her splendid dresses. For you, and for me?'

Steve stammered miserably that he would be glad to, and wondered had ever man got himself into quite such a hopeless position before.

'It will be splendid for her,' Frank continued. 'It will, I know, do her so much good. Then it is fixed. I am sure Lisa will be pleased, for she has spoken to me very often of you, and how at one time you have had many troubles with the face.'

This masterly understatement was made so simply that for the first time in his life Steve found he could talk of his one-time disaster quite naturally.

'I crashed over Germany, and was badly burned. The plastic surgeons got to work on me, and made a pretty good job of putting me together again.'

Frank nodded. 'Very good indeed. If Lisa had not spoken of it I would not have noticed anything unusual whatever, Mr. Fairfield. Indeed,' said Frank, laughing gaily, 'many men known to me who have suffered no disaster whatever, have more peculiar faces.'

Steve found himself laughing at what he had never been able to laugh at before. He got up and went along to the bar. Ignoring the welcoming cries of Aurora and her circle, he sat down alone in a corner, and ordered himself a drink. He sat

with it in his hand, watching the bubbles rise slowly from the bottom of the tumbler.

He knew in an awful moment of clarity what he ought to do.

He ought to go to the boy Frank and tell him the truth. 'I am in love with your wife.' I was desperately in love with her before ever you married her. I can't take her dancing tonight. I must stop having Burmese lessons with you, and keep right out of the way for the rest of the voyage or I cannot answer for the consequences.'

That was what he ought to do. But even as he thought about it, he knew he could never bring himself to do it. After all, the situation was none of his seeking, it had been thrust upon him. Why should he not get what pleasure he could from it, since he had to take the heartbreak? Little by little all the brave resolutions he had made went whistling down the wind in a sort of desperation. Fate was throwing Lisa into his arms. Why not take what Fate sent, and pay any price Fate might demand?

Aurora got up and left her noisy party over the way. To his horror she sat down beside him.

'We're having a little party for the gala dinner tonight, dearie. Now why don't you join us? I don't know what your secret sorrow is, but you can't go on nursing it for ever, you know. Why not join us for once, and be gay?'

It was a hot morning, and it struck him Aurora looked just a little like a piece of Turkish delight, indifferently packed. Her lipstick was blotted, and the varnish had peeled off some of her nails. A heart of gold, he thought, but a head of putty. He said, 'Well for once I am having a party of my own! Thank you very much all the same.'

She leaned forward, sinking her voice.

'It's that girl, isn't it? The one married to the Burmese. I want to give you a word of warning. There's something I think you ought to know.'

He looked at her. She hadn't exactly been drinking but she was a little flushed and her eyes were too bright. He tried to laugh it off.

'Look here, my good girl. . . .' He got up, but she pulled him back on to the sofa beside her. 'No,' she said. 'I'm going to make you listen to me. You're a nice man. I liked you the

minute I set eyes on you. Far better than anyone in this gang I've got myself mixed up in, but you're so damned stand-offish there has never been any getting near you.'

She laid her hand on his knee.

'Give me another drink, like a dear.'

He beckoned to the steward. 'Brandy dry,' said Aurora, and went on. 'I want to talk to you, to warn you, because I don't think you realize. You're in great danger.'

Steve laughed. . . . 'My dear girl, you're talking a lot of nonsense.'

'I'm not. Anyone can see with half an eye what is happening. That girl is in love with you, mad crazy about you. She's doing all she knows how, to get hold of you. And when he begins to twig, and realizes what's going on, what do you think is going to happen? Remember, he's not one of us. He's just a sort of a savage. They will whip out a knife as soon as look at you.'

'If you don't mind my saying so, he's a great deal less of a savage than some of us,' Steve said gently. Aurora was not to be taken seriously. All the same he was aware of a vague uneasiness as well as a growing elation. Suppose what Aurora said was true?

'If you're lonely. . . . If you want a little quiet fun. . . .' Aurora went on, her voice unsteady now. 'You don't have to go to those lengths to get it, Steve. You don't have to run your neck into a noose like that, and go looking for trouble.'

There was no mistaking her meaning. He patted her knee kindly, feeling acutely uncomfortable.

'I'm not looking for anything,' he said. 'Only peace and quiet. You're a good girl.'

She caught at his hand. 'Ah, Steve, don't go. . . .'

He managed to get away somehow, and left her and went up on deck. Now an odd recklessness seized him. Supposing there was something in what she said. Supposing it was true! Until that moment it had never struck him that what was in his heart might have found an echo in her own.

As for being in any danger from Frank, even if he did become suspicious, Steve entirely discounted that as a figment of Aurora's imagination, born of brandy dry!

So he tied his tie for the gala dinner with more than usual care

and went down with a hot excitement in his heart, that he had never thought to feel again.

Lisa had obeyed her husband and put on her prettiest frock of soft white chiffon that had silver threads woven through it. She had dressed her dark hair high, and threaded through it a string of pearls, in the way one of the Burmese ladies in the hotel in Notting Hill had shown her how to do. The Captain had invited a few of the passengers up to his cabin for drinks that night before dinner. Lisa and Frank were already there when Steve arrived, Frank gallantly sipping a glass of iced water.

'You see, I come to the cocktail party, though I shall not try the dinner,' cried Frank. 'You can have my beautiful wife. I shall go to bed.'

The Captain looked at him over his glass.

'Damn good-looking girl that,' he said to Steve, later. 'What do you make of it all?'

The Captain was large and bland, and for a long time Steve had been secretly worried by him. Surely they had met somewhere before. Then he realized that the Captain was exactly like the White Queen in *Through the Looking-Glass*—a mild bothered man, who, sometimes alone with him, recounted amazing adventures in a soft voice.

'That was the time I was in the *Jersey Lily*. Her bottom was shot off at Tobruk . . .' or, 'That was just after I spent five days in the Med. in an open boat. . . .'

The sea held no terrors for him. He was happy in storms and cyclones, which he accepted as all part of the day's work. A sailor's life, he told Steve, was no longer what it once had been, what with strikes at foreign ports, and labour troubles everywhere, and carping letters from the Head Office in London, written by the old men who still believed the East to be as they had known it back in the dark ages.

But tonight was the gala night, with paper hats and squeakers and whistles at everyone's place at table. A night when one forgot realities as far as might be. The Captain looked across the cabin at Lisa, with the experienced eye of a master of passenger ships.

'What did she do it for, I wonder. A girl like her. She could have had anyone.'

He filled up his glass with ginger ale, which has a festive air, and a way of looking alcoholic. Captains do not drink at sea.

'These mixed marriages never turn out well. I see too many of them nowadays, for my taste. Girls come out without any idea what they're going to. Probably find the fellow has one or two wives already. A year or so goes by, and there they are back again and I'm taking 'em home to Mother. Alone, and usually none the better in health for all they've been through.'

Steve said, 'I don't think this fellow has any other wives. He's a decent little bloke, though of course. . . .'

'I always like the Burman. He has a great sense of fun, a certain gentleness. As for their women—' said the Captain.

He broke off and helped himself to an olive. He stood for a moment looking out of the port-hole towards the gaudy sunset, lost in memories and dreams. He was back again in the jungle house where he had lived as a bachelor, when he had a shore job for the Company. He saw again the wide clean sweep of the veranda there, uncluttered by bric-à-brac. He caught again in memory the glimpse of a silk petticoat whisking tactfully out of sight when an English woman came to call on business. The Burmese girl he had lived with had been a charming and gay companion, and she had been a most excellent and economical housekeeper. He had never found her like anywhere else. She had looked after him, and been entirely undemanding, and when he had had to go back to sea, they had parted the best of friends and no ill feeling.

It was long ago now, before he got his mate's ticket. He was married, all ticky-boo and good and proper, to an Englishwoman who was waiting for him in Gravesend with an endless list of grievances and complaints ready to unload on him the moment he docked. He had come to look back on that jungle *ménage* of other years with wistful nostalgia, and it often seemed to him now that he had never been as happy, or as well looked after, or as at peace as when he was a young man, and poor, doing a shore job nobody wanted in a jungle port on the river at the back of beyond. All amongst the poor heathen and the tinkling temple bells !

That had been a mixed marriage of a sort, and he had to own it had worked out well enough. He had been heartbroken when

he heard she had died. Well, there it was. No good remembering and getting sentimental about it now, all these years after, and anyway, this affair he had on board was the other way round, and it was his experience that it never worked well that way.

Frank, on his glass of iced water, seemed to be in the highest good spirits, and the Captain moved over to him. He was talking about his plans for the future, his voice gay and as always a little boastful, but with the hopeful boastfulness of a nice child.

'My father has invested much money in big electrical undertaking and we shall shortly become very wealthy. When completed it will bring electricity to our entire district, which momentarily is minus same, of course, and is greatly needed for mills, and business schemes, etc. When installation is finished and working, everyone will have to pay my father for current received, which will prove a very fine thing for us. Forty per cent profit, or more.'

The Captain raised his eyebrows quizzically. He knew the East pretty well, its beauties and its pitfalls.

'Who is doing the job for you?' He named two of the big contractors now operating in the East that came into his mind.

'They too have sent us in tenders, of course,' said Frank. 'My father has considered them, but the tenders proved a little high and in the end we employ a Chinese firm. Also it is easier nowadays to get machinery, etc., from China, than from the West. Licences, permits and so forth not so strict there. Mr. Fong, who attends to all these matters for us, is a resident in our village just now, so can keep an eye on all matters.'

The Captain looked dubious, remembering this and that, and it seemed Frank read something of what was in his mind for he said quickly :

'Mr. Fong is well known to us through many years and is most reliable.'

'You want to be careful with those Chinks,' said the Captain.

'Mr. Fong,' said Frank, 'had a Burmese mother.'

He seemed to think that made it quite all right, but the Captain turned down the corners of his mouth.

'Preserve me from the half-caste in any shape or form,' he said to Steve, as they went down to dinner. 'Not that I'd trust

a Chink of any kind. They're too clever. The Burman is a gentleman, and most Chinks are at heart crooks. You wait till you see what's going on in Burma today. They're buying up land everywhere. When a business is for sale, nine times out of ten it's bought by a Chinaman and the tenth time you'll find it's a Chinaman's nominee. Make a few enquiries when you get to Rangoon. It would be interesting to find who this Fong is, and what he's really up to.'

A gramophone and amplifier began to play on deck. Steve went and stood by the rail, aware that his heart was beating as it had done long ago, when he was a young man and all the world was new, and he had stood waiting for Stella to come out of college after a late class. He passed a hand over his face, remembering. He had been a handsome enough lad then. He wished he could have had his old looks back again.

Lisa had gone downstairs to see Frank, who had retired to bed. Steve leaned alone on the rail, waiting for her, watching the stars reflected in the satin still water, like splashes of golden paint. All the madness and unreality of the tropical night was about him, the little waves along the ship's side tipped with phosphorus. It was, he thought, with a little shiver, the sort of night on which young men did damn silly things, and were sorry for it ever after.

Aurora, suitable in flame-coloured chiffon, joined him.

'Waiting for her, I suppose?'

He turned and grinned at her recklessly. 'Yes,' he said.

'Well, don't say I didn't warn you, dearie.'

'I won't.'

'And come to me, if you get wounds that need bandaging.'

He forgot her the moment she had gone, forgot them all. The deck had been cleared. It had been sugared all over with French chalk and decked out with flags of all the nations like a gay igloo. In the centre of it the Captain was courageously dancing with the Battleaxe. He had to take them as they came. It was his duty and he did it—one of life's occupational hazards. Placing the Battleaxe in the centre of the floor, he ran round her first in one direction, then in the other. . . . 'Dancing with tears in my eyes,' crooned the amplifier close by.

Lisa appeared at Steve's side out of the night.

'My husband is not so well. I think I should stay with him

and not dance, but he will not have it so,' she said doubtfully.

Steve took her hand.

'I will not have it so, either,' he said, and knew that this was the moment he had been waiting for and dreading of all day when he could at last take her in his arms. The night and the stars and her nearness went to his head, and he knew he was a little drunk now, but not with wine. Nothing in the world mattered and for the rest of the evening he meant to forget everything but that they were together. Let tomorrow take care of itself, just for a little while tonight she belonged to him alone.

When the first dance ended, he took her back to where their chairs had been drawn up against the ship's rail. They sat down in silence. He never quite knew when the knowledge came to him and he realized without the shadow of a doubt that what was in his heart found an answer in hers. And that she knew it as he did, and between them there was no need of words. When the music started again, she got up and made a half movement to go below.

'No,' he said urgently. 'No. Please.'

'It would be better,' she said very low.

He would not let her go. They danced the whole of the evening together, dangerously, in silence. Unaware of the interested looks that followed them, the Battleaxe's whispered comments, Aurora's following eyes. Unaware of the passage of time, and of everything save themselves.

Her hand in his, they climbed presently to the upper deck, empty and abandoned in moonlight bright as day, the shadows of the windsails and the lifeboats painted very black on the white decks. Up in the crow's nest, the faithful Lascar rang the time on his bell. Midnight. The evening was over. Elbow to elbow they leaned on the rail in the shadow of a lifeboat, and watched, far off, a lit ship pinned on the horizon like a diamond and emerald brooch.

'I love you,' he said.

She kept her face turned from him saying nothing at all.

'I fell in love with you that night when I came to the house and you opened the door. I thought you were one of the guests and I waited for you but you did not come in.'

'I cooked the dinner.'

'I know. I stood on the pavement afterwards, for a long time, watching you. You were there alone, washing up—in a big white apron.'

'It was Mrs. Ramsbottom's apron,' she said and she kept her face turned away so that he would not see she was crying.

'I wanted you so much, I was sick with longing. I wanted to come down and tell you there and then.'

'I wish you had,' she said very low. 'Oh, I wish you had.' She was in his arms, his lips against her hair.

'I was mad, a fool. I couldn't believe in it. . . . I told myself I was crazy and it would pass, but it didn't pass. . . . I told myself I'd done with women—because of what happened to me once. And then, when I began to realize, I'd left it too late. . . . You were married. . . . Why did you do it, Lisa? Why did you do such a mad thing?'

'Why did I do it?' she said bitterly. 'I was alone with no friends of my own. It was Christmas and he came to me and was so kind and good. He gave me a large box of Christmas chocolates. No one had ever given me chocolates before and I was so pleased but when I take them back your cousin tells me I have stolen them because I bought them with her money which she thinks I have taken. So she said I must go. . . .'

Tears ran down her cheeks as she remembered that hateful time.

'And Frank, when he heard, came and said no, I will look after you, and he found me friends, and a home, and has been so kind. Kinder than anyone I have ever known.'

'It was I who should have come. I should have taken care of you,' he said brokenly, 'but I was afraid you would send me away. . . .'

She shook her head.

'I would not have sent you away. For many days I have pretended it was you who have come.' She thought how in her own imagination she had taken his face in her two hands.

'It was the same with me, as with you,' she said brokenly.

If he had but known. It had been his golden moment, but he had not recognized it, and it had passed and would not come again.

'Are you in love with him?' he demanded roughly.

There was a long pause, as if she was thinking that out. Then at last she shook her head.

'No. But in my heart there is so much gratitude and real affection perhaps it becomes a little like love. All I now have, who once had nothing! Travel, a home, beautiful dresses. Nice food. And all from him.'

He had to ask it. He had to know. 'Are you his—wife?'

She shook her head. 'In that way, no. Because he has been very sick and weak, and the doctor has said it cannot be until he is well again. So I am not yet his wife. But when he wishes it,' she said simply, 'it will happen.'

In a wild senseless fashion he thought, 'Then there is still time.' But even as he thought this, he knew it was not so. He looked at her quiet face, oddly serene so close beside him, and his heart turned over.

'Supposing it hadn't happened this way. Supposing I had come to you that night.' He had to know, however much it tortured him. 'Tell me, Lisa, would you have married me? You wouldn't have sent me away because of the scars. Because of my ugliness.'

She turned to him then, her eyes wide with honest surprise.

'I have never thought you are ugly,' she said, and she looked at him with a child's honest frankness, as if seeing him for the first time.

'I like your face,' she said, simply. 'There is no ugliness there. In a manner it is beautiful . . . to me. I remember now I wished to take it between my two hands that first night. Oh yes. If you had asked me, I would have come.'

'Lisa,' he said hoarsely. 'Is there nothing we can do? Is it too late? Surely. . . .'

She looked at him again, and moved a little away from him so that their shoulders no longer touched.

'Of such things we must never speak,' she said. 'You have come too late, and I am married, and although I do not love him as—as perhaps I could have loved—he is good to me and very kind. I do not love him as a woman loves a man, I think, but as a woman loves a little child. To take care of it.'

'You don't understand. You don't know what you are going to,' he said brokenly. 'That's what makes the situation so im-

possible. You will be forced to live amongst people whose manners and customs are not yours.'

She gave her small quiet smile.

'But you forget what it is I came from. In the displaced persons' camp where I grew up there were many customs not mine. Many things I had to do I did not care for—and it was cold there, and always grey and there was no love and no flowers. In the country I now go to at least there are flowers, and the sun shines.'

'It certainly shines,' said Steve grimly, remembering many an airless hot-weather morning, when what breeze there was hit the cheek like a draught from a blast furnace. 'And you will live in a house that has no water, and no electric light.'

'Our house is on a river bank, therefore we shall have plenty of water. And Frank's father is even now making some fine new electric works that will supply light to all the countryside. But even if it were not so, I would go with him just the same,' she said. 'We will not speak of this again, please.'

She turned and left him, walking slowly, her silken skirts whispering all about her on the deck. Steve was alone in the starlight. He had thought when he lay in hospital after his crash, that he had plumbed the depths of misery, but now he knew he had been wrong. Nothing that had happened to him in his life before, was as bad as this. To see her not only married but so unsuitably married. To have to listen to the comments he knew would be bound to arise. He buried his face in his hands.

Someone moved beside him, and for one wild moment he half thought she had come back. He was joined at the rail by a red-faced, red-haired young man, one of the bar's most conscientious proppers-up. A young man Steve had been vaguely conscious of against the skyline from time to time always with a glass in his hand. A strange young man who frequently, and Steve thought insultingly, spent most of the day clad only in the briefest bathing trunks, his hirsute and by no means comely form perspiring freely.

Tonight the red-headed young man wore a dinner jacket, and on his head, a ridiculous paper hat fashioned to resemble a Highlander's bonnet.

'I say, old boy. . . .'

Steve looked at him distastefully.

'Well?'

'That little girl married to the Wog seems a nice little bit of homework. You seem to be making the going with her all right, what?'

Steve looked at him through eyes blurred with misery, only half hearing him.

'Be a sport. Give a chap the low down. Is she by any chance as accessible as one gathers she might . . . ' asked the red-headed young man, dropping his voice.

Steve knocked him down and left him lying flat on his back, a shattered glass beside him, his idiotic paper hat half over his face. Maybe, thought Steve, walking away and leaving him there, he was too drunk to remember what had happened, and who it was had knocked him out, but maybe he wasn't. A fine smoke-room scandal and story would then arise, with the usual winks and titterings. It was that made Steve decide, somewhere around two in the morning, that he could stand the situation no longer. In two days' time they would dock in Colombo. He would leave the ship there and put an end to the impossible situation. He would fly the rest of the stretch to Rangoon, putting the seas between them, and the endless misery of seeing her daily—and the inevitable gossip that was already gathering like a breaker all about them, which Frank must ultimately hear.

In the smoke-room they were still singing loud maudlin songs. He went below, pushed open the door of his cabin, and found Aurora sitting on the edge of his bunk. Her flame-coloured chiffon was mushed and tatty and the wind on deck had not been kind to her hair. By the litter of cigarette stumps on the bedside table, he knew she must have been there for some time.

'Did you knock Alec out?' she asked.

'If Alec is the red-headed chap, yes I did. . . . ' He stood with his back to the cabin door, eyeing her apprehensively, wondering would she go quietly.

She lit another cigarette.

'What a mug you are, Steve. Don't you see what will happen now? Everyone will start talking.'

'They can talk,' he said, shortly. 'And now, if you don't mind, I would like to go to bed.'

'No objection here,' she said, and he saw she had had quite enough to drink, so that the match she struck had to forage around a while before it found her cigarette tip. 'I never like to see a pal in a jam, and a jam is what you're getting yourself into, Stevie dear. You know the way out, don't you?'

Grimly he said, 'Yes. I know the way out. I'm leaving the ship at Colombo.'

'Don't be silly. There's an easier and much pleasanter way. Don't you realize, no one could go on talking about you and her, if we gave them something to talk about—you and I. Where's the harm, anyway? We're neither of us children. I hate to see a pal in a jam.'

He stood looking at her, her meaning only slowly dawning on him. Through the open port-hole he could see the stars, and the moonlight making a pathway of silver fish scales over the water. A perfect setting for a seduction!

He took her by the arm as gently as he could, and put her out into the alleyway, and her face as she turned on him was venomous.

'You'll regret this,' she said, and she swayed as she stood there. Steve grinned.

'I have so many regrets, I shan't notice one more,' he said, and shut and locked his door.

'How now,' said Frank, at lunch time next day. 'You did not join us for the Burmese lesson this morning. Some slackings off, I fear.'

'I was busy packing. I have decided to fly from Colombo.' Frank's gentle face fell.

'You get off ship there? But why must you do this?'

If only, thought Steve, I could dislike the fellow. It would have been almost easier to bear if he had been a brute or a scoundrel, instead of so friendly, so kind and anxious to help.

'I have so looked forward to more days with you on board,' said Frank, distressed. 'Also you make such good progress with the Burmese language. We have been such good friends, all so merry together, and for Lisa it has been so nice having some friend of her own. Can you not change the plan, sir?'

Steve said shortly, 'No,' and felt ashamed of his own un-

graciousness. And again he had the sudden mad urge to tell the boy the truth and be done with it.

But we shall hope to see you some time, up country where my father lives. We remain in Rangoon only few hours with my uncle who is there. Then we take aeroplane. Now it is a small journey in aeroplane, very convenient, very quick, only three hours. Meantime travel by train is not very reliable. A few bombs always here and there give trouble. However, we have now built a very fine railway station in Rangoon, and soon there will no doubt be trains to match it.'

Steve gave a short laugh at this typically Eastern manner of doing things. He watched Frank produce from his wallet the same visiting card he had given to Lisa that first afternoon in the London restaurant.

'Frank Khyn Nyunt. It means,' said Frank artlessly translating, 'Mr. Sincere Bud. I am very interested in the translation of different names. Yours, I believe, means Pleasant Location. In London the woman who worked there inside the house with Lisa was called, she tells me . . . Mrs. Rams Bottom, which appears to me a very curious thing. Not a very beautiful name.'

Again, in spite of his wretchedness, Steve had to laugh.

'Not beautiful at all,' he said.

'When up country you will promise to visit us?'

Steve turned away.

'It's unlikely I shall be up in that direction,' he said shortly.

It was the last night. The lights of Colombo were already a cluster of stars on the far horizon, and a lighthouse winked at them conspiratorially over the water. Most people were busy packing, but the gramophone played softly on deck for anyone who wanted to dance. Steve had been with her most of the day. He was leaving tomorrow. He might never see her again, so he made the most of the little time left him, aware that it did him no good. Later that night, after dinner, he caught her for a moment.

'I must see you, Lisa, to say good-bye. Upstairs on the top deck, after ten tonight. Please, please. I can't just go off like this. Without a word. . . .'

She looked at him pitifully.

‘It would be better not,’ she said unsteadily.

‘Please, darling Lisa. Maybe it’s the last thing I shall ever ask of you. I’m half crazy, I’m so miserable, but I’m going. I’m trying hard to do the right thing. Don’t make it needlessly difficult.’

She said very low, ‘Others are watching us, I think.’

‘I know. However careful one is, these things get in the air. But just once, just for a few moments, it isn’t going to make any difference. I’ll come up here at ten, and I’ll wait for you.’

SEVEN

For a time he had thought she was not coming. Then he heard her footsteps at last on the empty deck, and the whisper of her long skirts, and she was beside him. They faced one another in silence in the white moonlight. He thought she had been crying.

'Do you have to go?' she said. 'Frank is very sad. He likes you so much.'

'It makes it worse. The quicker I get out the better. I can't stand the present state of things, my dear. Seeing you about with him all the time—looking after him. The fact I can't help liking him myself is the last straw.'

She nodded, her eyes full of tears.

'It is a pity it has happened like this,' she said.

'If I knew—you were going to be all right. If I knew what kind of a life you were going to, what kind of people you'd be amongst, I could bear it better.'

She said, 'It can't be much worse than the dippy camp,' and tried to smile. 'Can it?'

'You don't know. I don't know myself. Look, I'm going to give you my address and my telephone number in Rangoon. If anything ever goes wrong with you—really wrong—send me word. I'll come, no matter where I am, or when it is. If you find that it's all quite impossible and more than you can stand—send for me. Write and tell me. Promise me that at least. Please, Lisa. . . .'

She swallowed childishly, fighting for self-control. He picked up her hand, and held it between his own, and she let him hold it.

'I will promise,' she said unsteadily. 'But it will not be so, my dear. Whatever the life is, I shall be able to stand it, for it cannot be worse than those other years I had. At least there will be sunshine—and flowers.'

'Too damn' much sunshine,' he said grimly.

'And the people will be kind.'

'You don't know. It won't only be Frank you are dealing

with. Frank is kind. He is travelled and cultured, and educated. But there will be Frank's mother and father, and all his relatives. Hundreds of them. They always have enormous families, and they won't all be as charming and companionable as your Frank. 'Frank has been around and rubbed shoulders with all kinds of people. His family have never been out of the jungle. They won't be like him. They will have habits and customs that will probably disgust you.'

She turned and smiled at him.

'I never had any family of my own, so I shall find it very pleasant to belong to one, whatever it is like. Even if they are not all as nice as Frank. To you, who have always lived in your own country, and been safe, it must be difficult perhaps to understand what it means to have no one at all.'

She broke off, and took her hand gently away.

'And now we must say good-bye.'

He took her gently by the shoulders and turned her to face him, and he saw her face was wet with tears.

'You have promised, Lisa. If anything goes wrong, you will send for me. Lots of people have tried to do what you are doing ; but it has not answered. If there is anything you want, you will tell me—if ever there is anything I can do. . . .' He broke off, incoherent in his misery. 'Oh, Lisa. . . . Kiss me just once. . . . Please, just once. Something to remember always. . . .'

For a moment she half turned as if to break free from him. Then she was in his arms, her lips against his. Not passionately. Tenderly and sadly. Very gently she took his face between her two hands, and said the words she had wanted to say to him that night in London.

'Never mind. . . . Never mind. . . .'

Then she turned and ran down the deck, and he stood alone in the moonlight, aware that he, too, was crying. A thing he had not done since the day Stella slammed the door and he heard the sound of her footsteps retreating down the hospital passage and knew he was left to fight his way through his sickness and misery by himself.

The ship docked at dawn, edging slowly through the heat mists of early morning to her buoy in the crowded harbour. The

vessels were lined up there like people in a queue at a bread shop. As soon as they anchored and the movement stopped, the heat came down on them suffocating as a wet blanket. Steve, standing on deck waiting his turn to get ashore, thought the scene not unlike his boyish idea of hell—the mournful wails from ships' sirens sounded all about him in the blazing hear, like souls in torture. The air was scented with cinnamon, mixed with the aroma of artificial manure from the factory on shore behind them. All about the town the flamboyant trees were in full flower, their golden and crimson gaudiness lighting the streets, the fallen blossoms making a gay carpet on the pavements. To the end of his days Steve hated the sight of them and the smell of cinnamon turned him sick, reminding him of the anguish of that morning. He stood for a moment on the jetty, and looked back at the ship. In a little while the breakfast gong would sound and Lisa would appear wearing the soft blue dress he loved. She would take in Frank's breakfast to him, and read him their letters.

No good thinking about all that. He was conscious of a feeling almost of relief now that he had broken free. At least he would no longer have to be the reluctant onlooker of another man's happiness and good fortune.

His luck was in. He managed to get a seat on the afternoon plane to Rangoon, where plenty of work awaited him. Once there, he would have little time for brooding and heartache.

Frank wanted to book rooms at the Galle Face Hotel.

'A good place. Very smart. You will like it,' he told her. Lisa, scared that Steve might be staying there, persuaded Frank to take her out to Mount Lavinia.

'It is a pleasant place, I am told. And I can bathe there.'

So they drove through the teeming bazaar with its coloured silks and piles of fruit and vegetables, under the gaudy flamboyant trees. Wild music tinkled from innumerable wireless sets, all turned on full blast, the din accentuated by the blasts on motor horns. Frank watched Lisa's amazement with delight.

'You like it?'

She said breathlessly, 'I can't quite believe in it. I never knew there were such places.'

A staid elephant emerged from a side street and joined the traffic, and now they left the main road and drove through coco-nut groves, to the Mount. It was a quiet day there, and the golden sands were empty save for the elephant, which turned up again some way farther down, to take its daily bath. It carried in its trunk a large palm leaf with which it fanned itself languidly from time to time. The catarmarans were putting out to sea, hopping over the waves like great grasshoppers.

'How sorry I am that Fairfield had to go,' said Frank. He could not swim because of his recent illness, but he had put on bathing trunks, and he lay beside her on the warm sand. 'I liked him so much, though I am not very sure he liked me.'

She said, not looking at him, her hair falling all about her, hiding her face from him, 'He liked you.'

'I do not think he considered me a suitable husband for you. And of course he is quite right.'

She leaned her cheek impulsively against his thin shoulder.

'I consider you a suitable husband for me, and that it enough,' she said quietly. She had been swimming in the clear blue sea that was warm as a hot bath and full of little silver fishes that brushed past, tickling as they went. Now she lay on the hot sand beside him, her head on her arms.

'I wish we could live here always,' she said softly.

'My country is far, far better,' said Frank earnestly. 'You will see. When we arrive we will stay first in Rangoon with my uncle. He is very rich. How much money he has made out of the soda-water factory ! While we are there I shall take you to the bazaar and buy you some clothes.'

She said hastily, 'How can I want any more clothes ? Look at all I have !'

'I have a great wish to see you in our Burmese national dress,' he said softly. 'Also for every day you will find it more practical. You will look even more beautiful.' He paused, and said doubtfully, 'I trust others will not be too jealous of you.'

She turned and looked at him in surprise, laughing.

'Why should anyone be jealous of me ?'

He hesitated for the ghost of an instant. 'Because you are very beautiful, my darling, and of fair colouring which, is not usual amongst us. Also because you have married me. Very

many girls were of course anxious to marry me in my own country, I can tell you.'

As always his boastfulness was amusing as the boasting of a child. She laughed and he laughed with her, lying beside her in the sun, his gentle face cupped in his two hands. And she thought suddenly how very suitable it was that the national emblem of Burma should be the peacock, vainest and most beautiful of all birds. She rolled over, teasing him.

'Well, now that you are married to me, that is the end, and no one else can have you.' Then, a little chill coming over her she remembered some of the warnings she had been given at home by the Browns, and the lady in the flat hat. 'That is, of course, unless you can have more than one wife, as they have told me.'

He shook his head solemnly.

'It is not our custom,' he said. 'With us you will find it is one wife only, and very little divorce. Sometimes amongst those who have travelled and been to England, it happens. But we are country people and we do not do it. With us, I think more often than with you, it is till death us do part, though of course we do not say it aloud so much.'

He flexed his muscles hopefully.

'How much better I am. Look at me. Soon I shall be quite well and strong again as I was before. It is a small miracle. In quite a little time now I think I shall be a good man for you.'

He turned and buried his face tenderly against her shoulder. She stroked his hair kindly and gently, and determinedly thought of nothing at all but the warm sun on her back, and the whispering of the waves, and the cry of the sea birds overhead.

'When the electrical installation is working, and we are very rich, as we then shall be, we must do some more travelling, you and I. I shall book first-class passages with every luxury attached, and we will visit America and Spain and many splendid countries like that. What fun we are going to have, you and I. What a beautiful life.' He day-dreamed, and she lay very quiet beside him, only half hearing him. It was best to try not to think. She let him run on, not interrupting him, feeling as though she listened again to one of the fairy tales the Herr Doctor had read to them long ago.

Most of the passengers disembarked at Colombo, and when the ship sailed again only a few had got on. There were four Buddhist priests travelling with holy relics that sat up in soap boxes outside the smoke-room, reverently covered with yellow cotton covers. There were cuttings of the Bo Tree under which Buddha dreamed his dream, planted in pieces of bamboo. There were a couple of globe-trotting Englishwomen wearing blazers and tapered slacks, who resembled battered undergraduates, and paced the decks smoking endless cigarettes. The Hpoongyis perched like birds in the deck chairs, each busy removing the sparse hairs that grew on their chins, with small pairs of tweezers. This appeared to be their sole pastime.

'They may not look at women,' Frank explained to her, but Lisa felt he must be making a mistake, for they were very jolly and friendly, and they looked at her a great deal.

'They may also not touch money,' said Frank, and she felt again he must be wrong, and clinging to some boyish ideal long out of date, for she came upon two of them buying a camera and wrist watches in the barber's shop, and it was obvious they had no lack of money.

The weather grew even warmer, and now of a sudden the whole sea about them changed colour. It was no longer the cobalt blue she had grown accustomed to, trimmed with little white horses. It was cocoa-coloured, turgid and thick, and the whole air was filled with the queer acrid muddy smell of it.

'Home at last,' cried Frank and he pointed enthusiastically to what seemed to Lisa to be low grey smudges on the horizon. In time they turned to green scrub on the flat paddy fields, and then, far off in the heat haze of morning, the delicate lovely golden spire of the Shwe Dagon Pagoda rose on its little hill in the middle of the town.

On the landing stage in front of the long low custom sheds, a crowd had gathered, gay as an herbaceous border. Frank's uncle had come himself to meet them, an elderly Burmese gentleman in a silk *putsoe* the colour of the distant golden pagoda. He bent very low over Lisa's hand, and appeared to her to be singing a little song that went on for a very long time.

'What is he saying?' she whispered to Frank.

'He is saying Welcome to Burma,' Frank told her solemnly.

A magnificent American car awaited them. The crowd of willing workers who appeared to handle the luggage were so friendly and gay that Lisa felt they must all be relations. She stood looking on, in a dream, watching their belongings being loaded on to a jeep. After the greyness and grimaces of London winter, it was difficult to believe she was not dreaming.

In the hot sunshine the air in the streets was full of strange and terrible smells, and the voices of a million crows. Great piles of refuse stood at street corners and were heaped in front of shop doors. Hairless dogs ravaged with disease dug and scavenged there, and along the pavement, food vendors had erected booths, and stirred their cauldrons with great ladles, filling the air with the added aroma of mohinga, and khowshway.

Here and there about the pavements lay still bodies swathed in sheets, at which Lisa looked in horror, for old memories awakened. She clutched at Frank's hand.

'Are they dead?' she asked.

The uncle laughed genially. He spoke in excellent English.

'They sleep. It is the hour of the siesta.'

She asked, astonished, 'But why in the streets? Why do they not go home?'

'These are persons who have no home. They are what I believe is now called "displaced".'

Lisa drew in her breath with a little sob. How easily she, too, might have been one of them, instead of driving in this beautiful car, followed by trunks full of fine clothes. And again her gratitude to Frank was very near love, and she pressed her cheek against his shoulder. The uncle saw the horror on her face and thought it was because of the dirt in the streets, and the hairless dogs, and the refuse piles.

'Now it is of course a little difficult,' he said apologetically. 'In other days the Indian labourers came over each year and worked for us as scavengers, cleaning the streets. In those days Rangoon was a very beautiful and clean town.'

'Why do they not clean them now?' she asked.

'Because of our vast unemployment problem you see the Government cannot give them permits to enter our country any longer.'

'Then why don't your unemployed persons do it?' she asked, bewildered.

'The Burmese,' said the uncle a trifle pompously, 'are a very proud and noble race, and will not perform menial tasks.' He said it solemnly, glad, it seemed, to belong to so proud and noble a race, however cockeyed their ideas. Lisa had been about to laugh, for she thought at first he was making a joke, but she realized that to him there was nothing incongruous in this fantastic statement. His pleasant face, covered with a fine network of good-humoured wrinkles like cracks in old ivory, was outlined against the morning brilliance of the blue sky, placid and serene.

'Rangoon was once the most beautiful city in the world,' he went on, 'and will be so again when we have got things going, as you say. When we overcome our many difficulties and finish our improvements.'

His voice went on and on. The magnificent car bounced in and out of pot-holes that were almost craters. Most of the bungalows they passed on the outskirts of the town had an air of hilarious collapse, but one road they drove along had surprisingly trim white bungalows in well kept gardens full of blue plumbago hedges, and scarlet poinsettias, against mown green lawns.

'British Embassy quarters,' said the uncle laconically.

Lisa's heart gave a sudden sick bump and she closed her eyes. All day long she had been so carefully not thinking of Steve, so conscientiously forgetting him, and here he was. Back in her mind again. In one of those neat white houses he would have his quarters. He would drive down this road to work. If they had met one another sooner, this might have been her life also, instead of the unknown surroundings she was going to. In one of those pleasant houses they might have lived together. . . .

She shut her eyes to keep back the burning tears that rose. It was a dream she must not dream, a picture she must not see. When Fate had given her so much more than she had ever dared think of or ask for, surely it was ungracious and greedy to want anything more.

The motor car bounced into a crater that it seemed for a moment must finish it off for good and all.

‘What do you think of our beautiful country?’ asked Frank, ignoring the jolt and smiling at her fondly as they jolted out again.

‘I think it is very lovely,’ she said kindly and wanted to laugh through her tears.

EIGHT

THE uncle's house stood on the edge of the lakes, with what had once been a beautiful garden going down to the water. A wooden jetty ran out over the water, with a boat tied to it that had sunk, because it had a large hole in the bottom that nobody had got around to mending. A Burmese boy, naked to the waist and clad in a scarlet cotton *loungyi*, sat on the end of the jetty, fishing, his image reflected whole and entire as in a looking-glass, in the still water. Now and again, far out, a fish rose with a splash, leaving a series of ever widening rings. Lisa stood leaning against the window and it seemed to her she had never seen anything so pretty or so peaceful as the quiet water and the fishing boy.

She was supposed to be resting now, but she did not feel like lying down on the white bed under the spread mosquito net. The events of the day came back to her. They had driven in through wide gates, down a drive edged with canna lilies, orange and scarlet and lemon. Through an open door Lisa had a glimpse of a table set European fashion with silver and glass and china.

'My uncle is very European, you see,' said Frank, laughing gaily. He took her upstairs to an inner room where his aunt, apparently not so European, was squatting on the floor. She was a stout woman, with hair still raven black, dressed high in a shining turban on her head. In her youth she must have been beautiful.

The room was splendid with brass and candles, furnished with a three piece suite upholstered in peacock blue.

'She speaks, I fear, little English,' Frank whispered, as Lisa advanced half shyly, but she was to find this did not matter. She was able to make herself understood well enough by signs. The aunt took her to her room, and proudly pointed out the double bed, the European dressing-table and wardrobe and chairs. A bathroom opened off the bedroom, in which two large chatties stood, a tin dipper floating in each. Lisa had washed and

brushed her hair and put on a clean frock, when the curtain over her door was pulled aside, and in came a blizzard of young women, like a drift of butterflies. They too spoke no English but there was no mistaking their friendliness, as they buzzed round her, fingered her frock, examined her stockings, and lifted her skirts to see what she wore underneath. One of them took the flowers from her own hair, and stuck them in Lisa's. They knelt all about her, decking her out with their jewellery, like children playing with a new doll.

She had been rescued by Frank, who came up to see why she hadn't appeared for lunch. He clapped his hands, laughing, crying, 'Thwa ! Thwa !' The bright blizzard blew out laughing and chattering as it had come.

'Those cousins, how tiresome they can be. I hope they have not tired you.'

Lisa said, 'They are charming. But where do they all live ?'

'Here,' cried Frank grandly, waving a hand. 'All of them here. It is a very large house.'

It must, Lisa thought, be a very large house indeed, for by the end of lunch she had counted twenty people, and even then the uncle mentioned a few others who regretted they had not been able to be present to meet her.

It was all so much nicer than stories she had been told in England had led her to imagine. Why had everybody, Steve included, had the idea she was coming to a life of hardship ? Everyone had been so kind to her, so friendly and charming. The aunt had brought her upstairs again after the midday meal and had indicated she should lie down and sleep. Everyone, it seemed, slept in the afternoons. But Lisa was too excited by the newness of everything, and she was still standing by the window looking at the still lake and the fishing boy reflected in it, and far off the tall spire of the golden pagoda shining against the blue sky, when Frank came up and joined her.

He stood there beside her in the window, his arm about her shoulders.

'How beautiful it is,' she said softly. 'I am going to like your country so much. Is it like this where we are going to live ?'

He hesitated for a moment.

‘It is slightly otherwise, of course, being in a country district and therefore more backward than here in my uncle’s house, but as soon as electricity is installed and power house going strong, we shall go ahead and have sufficient money to make our houses as good as this house, even more so. We shall make good roads, extend the railway into our town and build a fine station. My father has already the many plans for these things. Present rail head is ten miles off. At the moment of course, there are few trains on account of the bandits blowing them off the rails from time to time. But one day. . . .’

He dreamed on. Lisa watched him, trying to visualize the picture he painted of his home town.

‘It is very beautiful there. The river runs through the centre of town, which makes everything very clean because all rubbish can be thrown into river.’

‘But does that not make the river very dirty?’

Frank looked doubtful.

‘It is true it is not very clean,’ he said, ‘but then it is very large and swift so all is carried away. The water hyacinth grows there in great profusion. Very beautiful. And my mother. What a good cook!’

When Lisa had seen the profusion of curries, pickles, fried rice and sweetmeats on the table for the midday meal, she had had a moment of anxiety and whispered to him, ‘Please to be careful.’ He had given her hand a little squeeze. ‘Do not fear for me. I learned my lesson on our wedding day,’ he said.

Part of the time they talked English at table for her benefit. They asked her polite questions about the voyage and how life went in England today. Sometimes they all burst into Burmese for the benefit of the aunt. It sounded to Lisa exactly as if they were singing, and why, she wondered, was it necessary to talk so loud when nobody was deaf? One of the things that surprised her very much was the fact that the aunt had a heavy black moustache. Frank never had to shave as Major Brown had had to do, daily, and none of the other Burmese men she had met appeared able to raise more than a few straggly hairs on their chins. The uncle himself had half a dozen long ones that flowed down, carefully trained from the middle of a large mole. It was plain he thought very highly of this decoration for he fingered it

from time to time, as though making certain it was still there.

'With us it is considered very smart,' Frank told her.

A great number of servants waited on them, but as they were all dressed the same as the guests and the family, and as they all joined in the general conversation and gay badinage that went on, Lisa soon gave up trying to decide who was who or to disentangle cousins from staff. One of the uncles gave Lisa a long searching look and then said something in Burmese to Frank, who answered testily :

'Yes, yes. That will come presently. It will follow all in good time.'

After the midday meal the house was closed. The big grating was drawn across the front entrance, and locked, and the servants and all the family disappeared. Everyone went to sleep except the crows, who kept up their never-ending cawing in the trees on the lakeside.

Presently Lisa took off her dress, and lay down on the cool sheet. She could hear Frank rustling about in the small dressing-room next door, and presently she dozed off, and began to dream. A car drove up, and looking from the window she saw it was Steve come to look for her. Come to warn her against some terrible danger, but she could not understand what he said, and when she looked again she saw that down one side of his face blood was running. He had been terribly hurt, and she thought, 'I must go to him. I must go to him . . .' and she tried to get up, but Frank stood there in the doorway, barring her passage. She tried to push her way past him, but he held her, and then it was his voice in her ear that woke her, and she found him there beside her, his arms about her, his gentle face anxious.

'My little one. . . . What is it? What is the matter? You cry so in your sleep.'

She said, 'It was a dream, a horrible dream.'

He dried her eyes gently on his silk handkerchief.

'You must never cry any more. I want you to be gay and happy now, not sad. I have had word from the Air Office that we must fly tonight instead of waiting here as I hoped, for three days. It is sooner than I expected. Do you mind?'

'No,' she whispered. 'I want to go, to get to our own home. I don't want to wait three days.' In three days one might run

into Steve, might see him driving about the town. Better be gone and try to forget.

'All the same, it is very disappointing. I had hoped to take you to the big bazaar to buy silk for *loungyis*, and to show you our World Peace Pagoda—a very wonderful thing—one of the marvels of the world. Now it will have to wait for another time.'

'Never mind. I like best to get home, and unpack my house and settle down. I have never had a house of my own. It will seem very wonderful to me.'

'It is a beautiful house on a hill, with wide wood verandas and bathrooms as in England and a fine garden, that I have told my father to give us. You will like it.'

She said simply, 'I will try very hard to make you a good wife.'

'My little one, how good you are. How fortunate I am,' said Frank. He lay down on the bed beside her, and very gently took her in his arms. And she remembered, between dreaming and waking, to the incessant tune of the cawing crows, that in the Herr Doctor's fairy stories it was always a kiss that turned the frog into a prince. The great thing was to have the courage to give it.

They flew north in a small aeroplane that droned patiently through the night, high up amongst enormous stars. Far below the clustering lights of jungle villages looked like other stars fallen into captivity and become the servants of men. Lisa dozed a little, and was awakened from uneasy half-dreams by Frank's voice, trembling with excitement.

'Here is my home town,' he cried.

She leaned to look out of the little window, and saw far below them a larger cluster of stars. And then the picture tilted as they came down and she saw a river, and lines of lit streets, and the oil flares of the airfield and they were bumping over rough grass to a standstill. She felt deep dust beneath her foot and saw all around her a ring of curious faces, flat and greenish grey in the flickering light.

'And here is my father,' cried Frank, proudly. 'Father, this is Lisa, my beautiful wife.'

Frank's father was a long thin old man, almost six feet high,

surprisingly tall for that part of the world. He towered over the rest of the crowd like a poplar tree in a cabbage patch. He had the same placid wrinkled-cracked face as the Rangoon uncle, and he, too, took Lisa's hand and made the lengthy speech she now knew meant 'Welcome to Burma'.

But directly after that, he and Frank appeared to fall into some kind of argument, their voices raised and almost angry. Something, it seemed, had not gone according to plan. She stood swaying with weariness, watching the two of them, unable to understand anything they said, wishing only that they would end the discussion and take her home, so that she could go to bed. It had been a long and very tiring day. She stood leaning against the side of the truck in which their luggage had been stowed, and the ring of flat greyish green faces closed in on her. She looked at her diamond wrist watch, one of Frank's many presents to her. It was long past midnight.

Frank came over to her. The boyish gaiety of a little while ago seemed to have drained out of his face, and he looked gloomy and cross.

'I am very angry. We do not have the right house. Here as everywhere else there are good houses and not-so-good houses. I have written my father asking him for a number one good house on the hill and I now learn Mr. Fong the contractor has got this house, and we have got a not-so-good house on the river bank. Not a suitable house for you at all. Am I not the eldest son? Can I not have what I want?' he demanded, his voice rising again to an angry shout.

He seemed distressed to the verge of tears. She slipped her hand through his arm and tried to calm him. She was so tired that what sort of a house it was did not matter to her, as long as it was a house with a bed in it where she could lie down and sleep.

'The good wooden house I wanted I cannot have,' cried Frank. 'The one I spoke to you about, with cookhouse, sanitation and verandas and bedsteads. I, the eldest son, must stand down for Mr. Fong. It is not right. My father has for us only a small Burmese house in coco-nut plantation by river. Not a house for you at all. I am not pleased. I do not think that you will like it.'

'A coco-nut grove sounds lovely,' she said. 'I shall like it

well enough. Never before have I had a house of any kind. Can we not go there now, please ?'

She dozed, her head on his shoulder as the truck bumped through the darkness along what were obviously very rough roads. As in a dream she saw the little houses open to the world on one side lit up still as some of the family worked, while others slept. She wished she had been able to say something to Frank's father. He had looked so bothered, so humble, obviously trying to placate his son. Once he said slowly, in English, 'I could do nothing. It was what he wanted. Meantime, you know we must please the contractor.'

As long as they had a house of their own, she thought, what did it matter what kind of a house it was ! She dozed off again, and awoke with a jerk as the truck jolted to a sudden standstill. Lisa stood blinking at what she thought at first was a small shed in a garden. It was raised off the ground on sticks, the open veranda reached by a small flight of rickety wooden steps. It had three walls only, all made of matting. The fourth side, like the houses she had seen in the village as they came through, stood open to the world. The square room was entirely empty, save for two sleeping-mats, with pillows, rolled up against one wall. It was only when she saw the coolies carrying their baggage up the rickety wooden steps, that she realized this was no garden shed, but her new home. And beside her, mortified to the depths of his soul, stood Frank, almost in tears. To hide his misery and humiliation he swaggered, shouting at the patient coolies who staggered in sweating with their heavy boxes. There was no room in the small place for half their belongings.

'They must be put under the house. I cannot help it,' said Frank, his poor face ravaged with rage and disappointment. 'If you could manage here perhaps for one night, my darling, I will talk tomorrow with my mother. When she sees you she will understand it is not possible. I am ashamed this has happened. It is not as I wished it to be.'

His unhappiness drove every consideration from her mind. She put her arms round him.

'Why do you make all this fuss ? It is a very nice house, open and cool. I shall like it. I am so sleepy I could sleep anywhere. Send these people away, my dear and help me put up

the mosquito net. Your aunt has shown me how. There is nothing to worry about. We will unroll the sleeping-mats and put them side by side, so now see how pleasant it looks.'

'But the floor. . . . It is too hard for you.'

'We have rugs here,' she said. 'In the *dippy* camp the beds were wood and we had no rugs.'

He caught her to him in a passion of gratitude.

'Then you don't mind? To ask you, our first night at home, to sleep on the floor, seems to me very terrible.'

He was so near tears that it was more than she could bear. He reminded her poignantly of little John combating some grievous disappointment. She pressed her face against his, comforting him, and presently, soothed a little, he went off to the river to bathe.

Lisa undressed and lay down on the bamboo mat. It was cool and clean and had a pleasant acrid smell. Through a crack in the floor, she could see their baggage stacked under the house. A ginger dog had arrived and curled itself up to sleep on one of the suitcases. For some reason this homely touch was amazingly reassuring to her, and she smiled as she lay there, her hands behind her head, the starlight in her eyes.

Frank returned presently. He had in his hand a long pole with which he began poking in the roofspace and corners. She watched him, interested.

'Why do you do that?'

'For bats,' he said, still woe-begone, and even as he said it one, dislodged, shot out. This seemed incredibly funny to Lisa and she began to laugh, and presently, some of his wretchedness leaving him, Frank laughed too. He crept in beside her, and blew out the smoky little lamp. The bamboo house was flooded with white moonlight. It streamed in through the cracks in the bamboo matting it was made of, so that the whole house seemed to be built, thought Lisa, of lace. The river ran close by. They could hear the sound of it, softly whispering over the stones. Indeed there were worse places, thought Lisa, to spend a honeymoon.

'You are so good and so kind,' said Frank brokenly. 'You do not blame me for this horrible disappointment like some would. I am ashamed, but you do not let me be ashamed. At first when

I saw this house was for us, it made me mad. I thought how right the people were on the ship, who thought I was not a proper husband for you. I tell myself I was wrong. I ought not to have taken you. . . .’

‘So,’ she teased him. ‘You think I would be happier there with Mrs. Brown who thought I stole money. With no clothes or shoes or travelling. Or flowers or sunshine. . . .’

‘Certainly here there are flowers and sunshine,’ said Frank, mollified, ‘also coco-nuts. But someone else would have come for you. Some other man. I am well aware of that.’

She held his face gently against her shoulder, stroking his hair. For the ghost of a moment, now half asleep, it seemed to be Steve’s scarred face she held there, Steve’s arms that were round her.

‘I shall make this house very beautiful. You will see,’ she said. ‘We shall be very happy here, you and I.’

She fell asleep.

Once in the night she awoke to the sound of loud and mocking laughter, so that she thought it was someone making fun of her, and all her fine dreams and plans. She started up terrified, with the idea that somehow or other it was Mrs. Brown who had arrived and found her there.

Frank put his hand out and drew her back to her pillow.

‘Only hyenas, my darling,’ he said sleepily.

NINE

THE milk cart rattling down Charles Street had awakened her to many a grey London morning. Here she was roused by the sudden singing of a myriad of birds. Frank still slept, his gentle face puckered with the anxiety and disappointment of the previous night. Lisa sat up without awaking him, listening to the birds. Presently she got up and went down to the river bank to bathe.

In the morning light the water lay still and almost colourless. Along the bank, a line of frangipanni trees shed star-like blossoms on the stones. She stooped and picked one up and stuck it in her hair. Great patches of water hyacinth with their soft mauve coloured flowers, went floating by like rafts. On one of them, solemn and stiff, sat a white paddy bird, like a skipper of his barque.

The little house Frank's father had given them stood in a coco-nut grove. It reminded Lisa of the witch's house in many a fairy story she had read to little John in other days. It made her laugh to look at it, for it had a comical air, leaning all askew, for all the world as though it were made of gingerbread and someone had already been nibbling at it. But it was a dear little house. She, who had never had a home of her own of any kind, was delighted with it. Living in it would be like living in a caravan. When she looked at it she saw it not as it was, but as it would be, when she had done it over and rearranged it.

Certainly it lacked all modern conveniences, and was not exactly the home she had expected, from the glowing pictures painted by Frank. It had already begun to dawn on her that her boyish husband was inclined to be over-enthusiastic and optimistic. He was always so touchingly sure that everything was going to be all right without anyone exerting himself unduly about it, but this weakness of his she only found endearing.

There was so much to recommend the place. The river would be their bathroom. The small lean-to shed behind the house would be their kitchen. Even as she thought this, a fish

jumped making ever-widening silver rings on the satin water, a coco-nut fell from the tree near her with a heavy thud on to the grass.

'Even food is ready to hand,' thought Lisa, and she laughed softly. Standing there on the banks of the wide river, clad only in one of the big bath towels she had brought from England, she watched the sun rise and turn the colourless water of the river to opal, and from opal to gold. And now from the river bank little canoes set out, bound for the bazaar. A sampan creaked by her, the boatman standing, and leaning on his oars, and paid no more attention to her than if she had been a frangipanni tree herself.

Frank appeared suddenly, distraught, running towards her.

'I thought you had gone . . .' he stammered. 'I awoke and you were not there.'

She slipped an arm through his, laughing.

'Foolish ! Where would I go ?'

'I thought because of disappointment about house, you run away.'

She said, 'But I am not disappointed about the house. I think it is in a very beautiful place, and our dinner, it seems, is all round us. Wait until you see all that I shall presently do.'

At first despondent, she presently won him round to her way of thinking. He went to his father's house and presently returned with a bullock cart bringing chairs, a bedstead, a table and an oil cooking stove. With dunnee palm matting he put up a partition so that they now had two rooms, a bedroom and a living-room. Clad in a singlet and a blue cotton *loungyi* Frank laboured mightily at household improvements, now as enthusiastic as he had once been despondent.

Lisa unpacked, appalled at the number of things they had brought out with them, and had nowhere to put, for the little mat house had nothing as sophisticated as a cupboard in it, and the magnificent evening frocks Frank had bought for her, swung for the time being on a rope strung between two palm trees, lending a slightly fantastic air to the scene.

'What fun it is,' she said.

Frank looked down at her from the ladder on which he was perched, nailing up the partition.

‘It is only fun because you think it is fun, my darling. Otherwise I think it would be very terrible for you, coming to what is only a coolie’s house. The house I had hoped to have for you. . . .’

Lisa had heard all that before, so she did not wait. She made a face at him and went back to her boxes. And presently a little crowd began to collect in the compound. They squatted in a circle, watching, making remarks now and again, most of them smoking long cheroots. Now and again one more courageous would creep closer and finger Lisa’s towels and sheets with approving nods and exclamations.

‘Who are they?’ Lisa asked Frank presently.

‘Neighbours, no doubt,’ said Frank, and went on with his work. Next time she looked up at him, he had been joined by a short ugly little man, square and strong as a bullock.

‘This is my brother, Saw Win,’ Frank said. ‘It means Mr. Superior Glow in English. I have told him you are my beautiful wife and he thinks I am fortunate. He is not much sought after because as you can see, he is not very handsome.’

Saw Win seemed unmoved by this unflattering description of himself. He picked up a packing case as if it was a tennis ball and carried it under the house. She had lost the key of it, and had been wondering how they were to get it undone. Saw Win said nothing at all, but he got a piece of wire, and had it open in no time.

‘He is very sensible,’ said Lisa, ‘and I think he has a very nice face.’

Saw Win grinned at her and said, ‘Thank you.’ So it seemed he understood English all right, though he seldom spoke it. Indeed as time went on she was to find he seldom spoke at all.

Presently Frank descended from his ladder and surveyed his handiwork. Then he stood and surveyed the little crowd of onlookers squatting round his house.

‘Why has Ma May not come to help us? She is a nice girl, pretty and well educated, and could be of much help to you. She would have liked very much to be my wife, and at one time the parents were planning that it should be, but I am naturally more modern in my arrangements.’

Lisa had a brief moment of discomfort. It was understandable

enough that Ma May should not come, under the circumstances. One could hardly expect her to be cordial, and the idea that she might have an enemy amongst all these friendly people cast a small shadow on the day's brightness. Maybe, thought Lisa, Frank's parents themselves would not be too pleased about their son's marriage. She had been too tired and bewildered the night of their arrival, to know whether Frank's father had been pleased to see her or not. She still had to meet Frank's mother, and a mother-in-law, even of one's own kind, Lisa knew, mostly presented a problem.

Saw Win had disappeared, but presently he came back, pushing a hand-cart on which was stacked some pieces of wood. In no time he had erected a large cupboard in one corner of their bedroom, complete with shelves for Lisa to stack their linen, and a hanging compartment at one side.

'But your brother is wonderful,' she said to Frank.

'He is not very well educated,' Frank said solemnly, and did not know why Lisa laughed.

There was a stir in the crowd round the house, and a pathway was made for a large stout placid woman who looked so exactly like Frank's Rangoon aunt, that for a moment Lisa thought she must somehow have managed to get there. It was Frank's mother, come to inspect her daughter-in-law. She brought curry and rice with her for their midday meal, and a large bunch of green bananas which she hung up on a nail on the veranda to ripen. She spoke very little English, but from her nods and exclamations Lisa gathered she was impressed by their improvements. She seemed a kind and placid person, who accepted Lisa as one of the family, whatever other hopes she might have had. Frank's father also came, and squatted on the veranda, smoking a long fat cheroot with a very odd smell to it. His hair was done up on top of his head like a woman's, in a small grey bun.

'My father follows the old fashions,' Frank explained.

The old gentleman remained there all day. He gave a lot of advice but he did not offer to help at all. It was soon obvious to Lisa that apart from Saw Win, who was astoundingly energetic, presumably to make up for his lack of education, the women did most of the work.

Little by little, as the days went by, the novelty of their arrival

wore off. The crowd of squatters and onlookers lessened, until all that remained was a tiresome group of children who poked about touching things, and when Lisa tried to drive them off, pelted her with coco-nuts.

'Frank, can you not send them away, please?' Lisa pleaded.

He looked worried. 'Where can I send them, my darling? They have no place to go.'

A slight slim figure crossed the grass under the palm trees. Her skin was almost as fair as Lisa's own. She wore her dark hair European fashion, brushed back in a chignon; the trailing white jasmine she had tucked into it fell over one shoulder. Frank saw her and his face lit.

'At last. It is Ma May. Ma May, why did you not come sooner?'

'I had the stomach ache,' the girl replied quite simply, and she took Lisa's hand in hers, and smiled at her so sweetly that Lisa realized here was no one who bore her any resentment, but a friend.

Ma May spoke English perfectly, in a low pleasant voice. Moreover, she had with her a way of authority. Picking up a stick, she turned and said something to the children, who fled.

'I would have come sooner, had I been well,' said Ma May.

'Ah, you also! These dangerous stomachs! Always they give trouble,' said Frank, pleased at this bond between them. 'I am glad you have come. You and Lisa must be good friends.'

It struck Lisa that maybe this was another case of Frank's over-optimistic outlook. Ma May had probably not been as anxious to become his wife as he supposed, but not for worlds would she have said this to him, or spoiled his beautiful idea.

Like Frank's mother, Ma May had no inhibitions about hard work. She did not mind dirtying her hands. From the time she arrived, things began to move in the little house on the river bank. The girls washed and put away china and cooking pots, reorganized the cooking arrangements, and chattered like a couple of minah birds, as they planned all the various improvements they would make, and all the things they meant to do.

'There must be curtains for the windows and across doors, and mats for the floor,' said Ma May. 'Saw Win can build a larger kitchen. He is a clever boy though he has no education.'

Always he has stayed here in the village, going only for a short time to the Hpoongyi *chaung*. That is the school at the pagoda where they teach the boys.'

'And who teaches the girls?' asked Lisa.

'The girls do not get taught anything here,' said Ma May. 'I was fortunate. I was sent to the American Baptist Mission but now unfortunately it is not here any more.'

In those first days of her strange new life, Lisa had, for the first time, a girl friend. Ma May entered into the business of doing up the little house, as enthusiastically as if it had been her own home she was making.

She took Lisa into the dark and noisome caverns of the Big Bazaar down in the town centre, with its long dim aisles lined with silk stalls and piles of brightly coloured cottons, its vegetable and fruit stalls, colourful and gay, its distressing lines of entrails hanging nightmare-fashion from hooks in the meat stalls amongst the tortured fowls and flattened ducks. Lisa would never have dared to venture there alone. The vendors squatted on the counters of their stalls, holding out skinny arms, trying to catch at the girls as they passed. 'What you want? Here, here. . . . I got it.' Lisa clung scared to Ma May's slim hand, for the scene to her was somehow horrible, reminding her of the packed aisles and grim walls of the dippy camp.

To Ma May it was nothing at all, part of the day's work. She shouted and bargained with the stall keepers, who seemed only to think the more of her for her eloquence. The swarming beggars who followed the girls round, the little boys with mutilated limbs carrying baskets, slapping fat little stomachs as they wailed 'Backsheesh. . . . Bachsheesh. . . . Missie. . . . No sister!! No mister!!' she shoo'd off mercilessly. Women suckled leprous babies in dim corners of the bazaar. A young man strode by carrying in a basket an old man, grey bearded, who had neither arms nor legs, and was his father. A small boy, also legless, ran merrily about the rough mud floor on his buttocks like a small quick mouse.

The sights and smells turned Lisa sick for a moment, but she braced herself to bear them. Since this was to be her new life, she must accustom herself to its shadows, as well as its sun. Ma May noted her sudden loss of colour, and hurried her along to the

cupra bazaar where they sold the flowered chintzes and cottons.

Here Lisa spent the money she had earned and saved in her time with the Browns, thankful for her thrift of other days. Changed from sterling into rupees it seemed to her vast wealth, but she learned that setting up house, even in the jungle, is an expensive business. After much discussion and thought the two girls decided on a bright cheerful rose-covered chintz.

'Frank likes very much the English flower, the rose,' said Ma May, and went on to choose two Kashmir rugs for the floor, with a white background roughly embroidered in scarlet, orange and green wool. Then they went on to the street of the potters, and bought big earthenware bowls, which Lisa planned to paint white and plant with flowers, arranged the way Mrs. Brown had done hers in the house in Charles Street, London. In all these cheerful doings, Lisa forgot for the moment the horrors she had seen.

They walked back carrying their own parcels in a basket Ma May had thoughtfully brought with her. Everywhere about the streets and the bazaar, the children swarmed, quarrelling, playing games, throwing stones, and kicking the deep dry dust into great clouds.

'It is a pity,' said Ma May. 'Now there is nowhere for them to go.'

'Then do they grow up knowing nothing at all?' Lisa asked, horrified. Even in the dippy camp they had been taught to read and write, and do simple arithmetic, and kindly people like the Herr Doctor had taught them many things more than that.

'Nothing at all,' said Ma May lightly. 'At least, nothing that is very good.'

Life settled down into a pleasant pattern and routine. Ma May lived a little way down the village street beyond the Hpoongyi *chaung*. She walked up every morning to spend the day with Lisa and help her with the sewing. Together they made curtains and cushions and arranged the furniture in the little house until it took on something of the air of a seaside bungalow. Frank brought his friends in to look at it, and strangers, it seemed to Lisa, were for ever wandering in and out to examine its beauties, lost in admiration.

Frank had gone back to work. He breakfasted early and rode off down the road on his European bicycle, his *loungyi* tucked up practically about his slim middle so that it resembled a voluminous pair of ladies' bloomers, brightly checked. He came home at noon for the midday meal, and then went off again until evening. Work, he said, was going on well at the new installation and soon it would be possible to give a date for the switching on.

In the evenings when the worst of the heat had gone out of the sun, and the white mists began to gather in wisps about the paddy fields and over the river, Frank drove Lisa out and proudly showed her the town and the surrounding country. Their car was an ancient jeep, left behind long ago by an American gentleman who had departed in a hurry. Frank had had it painted a bright red, which gave it the air of having some close connexion with the Post Office.

Through the narrow lanes that were ankle deep in the dry season in rose-pink dust, they rattled and bumped. Through green tunnels made of feathery bamboo, and along the roads between the rice fields, they raised a pink cloud which hung for a long time over the country after they had gone by.

The town sprawled untidily along the river bank in lines of wooden and mat buildings, so old, so decrepit that it seemed to Lisa they would have collapsed and slid into the river, but for the gaudy bright strands of the bougainvillia that festooned them and bound them together. Orange and purple and salmon, their spent blossoms fell into the water and drifted off in gay patches on the tide.

The domestic life of the villagers was largely lived on the river bank. Women washed clothes and children there, and modestly bathed themselves. Sampan laden with vegetables slid by to the bazaar or to a festival at the pagoda, and the waters of the river provided any sanitation there was.

At the back of the town on a little hill, a whitewashed pagoda raised its delicate spire against the sunset. All day long the temple bells there tinkled in any breeze there was. Within the shrine a more than life-sized Buddha reclined supporting his head on one hand, for ever patient, for ever still. Birds had greatly defiled his face, and a few ferns had begun to sprout about his

person. It seemed to Lisa, standing there in the massive shadow of him, that his face wore an expression of tolerant amusement.

'My father has built this shrine,' Frank told her proudly. 'Indeed, he has built many shrines, and before him other members of my family have done likewise, as you can see.'

It was indeed the case, for the landscape all about them was dotted with whitened shapes of various kinds not unlike small blanchmanges, all of them mouldering in a sad condition of disrepair.

'Building a pagoda and a shrine gains for one much merit,' Frank explained. 'Unfortunately there is no merit in repairing same which is a pity, of course. Many are falling down somewhat.'

He showed her the rice mill, and farther out of the town, the brick works which also, it seemed, belonged to his father. None of them, she saw with surprise, was working. There hung about them the same sad air of neglect and disrepair she had seen on the pagodas.

'Unfortunately we had to close them. They did not pay, you see,' Frank explained. 'Too much money all the time going out and none of it coming in again.'

He laughed gaily at that good joke.

Lisa said, shocked, 'But what a terrible waste. All these fine buildings and machinery.'

'Oh, it will not be entirely wasted,' Frank assured her airily. 'In fact, Mr. Fong has a friend who is interested in purchasing the rice mill from us, which would be a good thing.'

Lisa stood staring at the huddle of buildings, the thin tall chimney at the back of the measuring ground, the slipway for gigs, the landing stage and repair shop. It all seemed to be in better repair than most of the things she had seen and a sudden feeling of doubt came to her for the first time.

'If it does not pay,' she said slowly, 'why should Mr. Fong's friend wish to buy it?'

Frank laughed happily.

'Who can tell? The Chinese are very clever people. No doubt he will turn it into something or other, sooner or later.'

'But if he can, then you can,' Lisa persisted.

Frank ignored that. He went on, 'At one time we ran also cement works. You can see the buildings down there. That also, most unfortunately is not working, for Mr. Fong found it was cheaper to obtain cement for the new installation from a friend of his who has a factory for same in Thayetmyo.'

Twilight had fallen as they stood there. Purple shadows enwrapped them and took away the river and the town. Lights like stars pricked out in the villages on the opposite bank, and in the town. Lisa shivered suddenly, but not entirely with cold. It was a moment she was to remember long afterwards—when in her mind uneasy doubts about Mr. Fong were first born. She was a practical girl, and one who did not give up easily, and it seemed to her then once again Frank took the line of least resistance and accepted without question whatever the Chinaman told him. She looked at her husband, hesitating, longing to ask him if they always relied entirely on Mr. Fong. Surely there must be someone else from whom they could take advice about his suggestions, and she remembered with deepening uneasiness Steve's surprise when he heard who it was was building the installation for them.

In the end, she said nothing, for who was she to know better than those who had lived in the country all their lives? Who was she to upset Frank's trustingness with ugly doubts? He was well disposed towards this Mr. Fong as he was to all the world, and again her affection for him was very near love, and she pressed her ch  ek against his shoulder impulsively.

'You are cold,' he said. 'Come, let us go. How fortunate I am to have such a wife, for it is clear you are not only very beautiful but very clever, and will be of great help to me in my business, in one way and another.'

She said, slowly, 'Frank, where is this Mr. Fong?'

'Meantime in China. He nips here and there seeing about machinery and this and that, you know. It is convenient we are so near Chinese frontier.'

Again she had the impulse to say, 'Do you really know anything about him? Does everybody trust him as implicitly as you and your family do? Surely it is not wise to take things so entirely at their face value, asking no questions?'

And then she was ashamed, thinking, 'It is I who am wicked

and foolish to think such things, for was that not how he took me? In gentleness and kindness, asking no questions. . . .’

‘You will like Mr. Fong very much I am sure when you meet him,’ said Frank happily. ‘He is a very gay man. He plays the bagpipe,’ he added unexpectedly. She laughed, but the uneasiness that had been born, remained in her heart.

‘Tomorrow I shall take and show you the new installation,’ Frank said. ‘It is out at the other end of the town.’

The visit did nothing to reassure her. A tangled mass of buildings and sheds was growing up, some way north of the town. It looked like the things little John used to build with his wooden blocks in the nursery in Charles Street. Ambitious but haphazard and singularly unfinished.

Frank, it was obvious, had no qualms about it all. He parked his scarlet jeep under a palm tree, and helped her over the piles of girders, the tangle of rusty iron that littered the ground, explaining gaily as they went along.

‘The turbines, you see, will be worked by water pressure from the river, which runs here a very fast current, and has high tides all the time. Presently the whole countryside can be flooded with electric light and the many amenities of electricity, and of course, everyone will have to pay money to my father to get same, so we shall become very rich in a short time. Then I shall be able to give you many beautiful things. Rubies from Mogok, silks and many more jewels than you have at present, and you shall never do any more work.’

Into her mind came a snatch of one of little John’s nursery rhymes: ‘Sit on a cushion and sew a fine seam. And you shall have strawberries. . . .’

She said, ‘But I like doing work!’

‘Well, you can do a little easy kind, perhaps. Something ornamental,’ said Frank, and he trod on a cockroach. They swarmed everywhere, giving her the shivers. Large, well nourished cockroaches they were, such as she had never seen before. Shiny like brown patent leather, or dappled like tortoiseshell. They had swarmed all over the cement factory and the rice mill, also. Unhappily Lisa found herself wondering had there once been a time when the whole countryside was to be flooded with dividend-paying cement? With beautifully milled

local rice? She put the thought quickly away from her telling herself it was disloyal. Surely if Frank, and Frank's father, and the great Mr. Fong, all thought it was a paying proposition, it must be all right.

But the rice mill and the brick works and the cement works kept on looming up in her mind, try as she would to forget them. And the whole layout, if she faced the truth, looked ramshackle and haphazard to her, and had already acquired something of the delapidated air that stamped most of the family undertakings. The doubt was there, a constant nagging worry in her mind.

Apart from the tangle of old iron lying about, and one or two rusty boilers, she could not see any machinery, though she peered into one after another of the empty godowns and sheds.

'Mr. Fong is procuring same from China,' Frank explained. 'It is much less expensive than from Britain or America, and as a matter of fact Mr. Fong has friends in Customs on the frontier which you can understand is a great help, don't you see.'

A great help, Lisa thought involuntarily. But to whom? She said nothing at all, and Frank did not notice her silence. He went on: 'Mr. Fong is seeing to all these matters for us, or you would have met him long before this. He has been most enthusiastic about our marriage and will certainly give you a very rich and splendid wedding present, you will find.'

He helped her over a mass of shavings and pieces of wood heaped together as though giants had been playing at Spillikins.

'In three months from now it will be finished and ready. For the opening day we have arranged a *pwe* with marionettes and the lights all over the town that will come on when my father turns the switch for the big opening gala and ceremony. There will be music and first class dancing girls, and free food and much music. There will also be conjurers and acrobats. . . .'

She knew by the way his gentle face lit that already he saw in his mind these beautiful things.

'Surely that will cost a lot of money!'

'It will be expensive,' Frank agreed, 'but then you see the money will from that moment start coming in, so we need not worry. We shall get it all back. And what is even better, once everything is finished and working properly and no snags, then Mr. Fong will return to his own country and I shall at last get the

house I want for you. My father's number one good wooden house. Come. . . . I will show it to you.'

It was a proper bungalow standing in its own wide compound. It had been built in other days for a European Deputy Commissioner who had had charge of the district. It was well placed on a little hill, the veranda facing the river, where they would get the evening breeze. Flamboyant trees gaudy with blossoms of scarlet and gold flowered all about it. The red shingled roof came low over the wide verandas, keeping out the midday heat. It would be airy and cool there, Lisa knew, in the hottest weather. There was green grass round the house, and flower beds full of the rich velvety leaves of the croton, and of cosmos and flame and crimson zinnias. And beside the veranda, where its petals must have blown into the house on the evening breeze, grew the loveliest of Eastern trees, a jacaranda.

No underwear hung from window or veranda, as it did in most Burmese houses. No hairless dogs stretched and scratched about the kitchen quarters. Everything was neat and clean and in apple-pie order.

Obviously Mr. Fong was a very tidy man.

Later, when she looked back on that evening, and remembered her first glimpse of that house on the hill, it was with a sort of amazement that she had had no feeling of premonition whatever about it. Nothing warned her of all that would happen to her there. No bell rang.

TEN

THE cold season was over. It began to get hot so that even at nights and in the early morning, the breeze was no longer refreshing, but came unkindly, like a blast from an open oven. The padauk flowered for the second time and shed its blossom within an hour or so, giving the whole of the little town a golden carpet for a brief space, filling all the air with its stifling sickly sweet scent.

The little mat house in the coco-nut grove was wonderfully comfortable and cool. Saw Win had appeared one day with a spade, and saying nothing whatever had dug them a garden that was now bright with flowers that began to wilt sadly in the noon-tide heat. With the approach of their new prosperity, Frank had insisted on engaging two servants. Lisa objected, preferring to do her work herself.

'It cannot be,' Frank said firmly. 'You are smart married lady, and must behave as they do, doing nothing at all. Nothing menial.'

It was a word Lisa had never come across before, nor could Frank explain it to her, beyond saying it was something no lady ever did. Lisa found idleness hateful. From her earliest childhood she had had too much to do. Suddenly the day was too long for her. She went for walks that seemed to her purposeless and silly. She and Ma May sat together sewing in the garden beside the house. Now and again she managed to persuade Ma May to go out with her for a saunter, but not often. Like most Burmese ladies, Ma May saw no sense in walking about when you could sit still, more especially now the weather was growing hotter and hotter.

In the dusty village street, and the clearing about the big banyan tree in the centre of the town where the guardian spirit, or Nat was supposed to live, the children played in the dust. Some wore smart green velvet hats and nothing at all. Some wore a little shift that left off just above the buttocks. It horrified Lisa to see the state of dirt and neglect of most of them. Many were

covered with sores, and had eye afflictions of every kind. Even in the dippy camp children had been kept clean and free from disease as far as possible. There was no education of any kind for the little ones. Even in the dippy camp they had all been taught to read and write and add.

'Ma May !' Lisa sat up suddenly as the great idea came to her. They had been lounging together in the shade of a coco-nut palm through the afternoon heat. 'I know something we could do, you and I.'

Ma May smiled idly and hoped it was nothing energetic.

'We will start a school. Here in my house. We will call it a Play School, and teach the children to sing and play games and be clean and tidy and I will get some boracic and things and bathe their eyes.'

Ma May was enthusiastic.

'I could teach the older girls to do sewing and make lace. Why not ? At the Mission School they taught me. If we are successful I know other girls I can get who would be glad to come and help me teach.'

As simple as that it was, in the beginning. Only Frank was pessimistic.

'The children will never come. Or they will come for a little time from curiosity and then go away again and not return.'

'No. I will make a small charge—one or two annas a week perhaps, paid in advance. Then because they have paid the parents will force them to come if it is necessary but I do not think so. All children like to play games.'

She remembered the eager little faces crowded round her in Hyde Park, when she had gone there with little John and his friends.

'I will make boracic lotion and bathe their eyes. And I will teach them to be clean and tidy and not to spit on the floor.'

He looked at her with deep and fond admiration.

'Certainly I have married a wife who is also good business woman, but my dear, there are too many difficulties. Books, paper, pencils—where will you get them ?'

It was then she remembered Steve. Through the long weeks she had dutifully kept the thought of him at bay.

Now she remembered he had said, 'If there is ever anything

you need. . . .’ She sat down that night, and wrote a letter to him. She had to write sitting on the floor inside her mosquito net, because it was a bug night. Earlier in the day the first of the mango showers had fallen, letting loose the entire insect world about their ears. The heavens rained beetles as small as pin heads, and large armour-plated beetles that fell to the ground with a crack like a walnut, and medium sized beetles of every shape and colour, that fell to the ground with a rattle like spent ammunition.

‘Dear Steve,’ Lisa wrote in her careful script. ‘There is something you can do for me. . . .’ She was never to know how his heart leapt when he read those words and thought maybe what he had hoped she would ask of him wasn’t just copy books, scribbling paper and pencils, still it was doing something for her. It brought him a crumb of comfort to know, too, that she was well and apparently happy. He got a certain pleasure from driving down to the bazaar that evening, and buying largely and recklessly, so much more than she had ever hoped for, or asked.

Lisa and Ma May had walked down when the worst of the heat had gone from the sun, to the general post office in the centre of the town, to post Steve’s letter. The post office stood at the far end of the main street, a hideous red brick building trimmed up with blobs of stucco-like icing untidily done—the only building in the town representing Western culture.

It stood next door to the Chinese joss house, that represented an older, and more beautiful form of culture that only emphasized its hideousness. Lisa had passed the joss house before with its gold and black pillars, its beautiful circular doorway, the niches at either side of it filled with little coloured porcelain figures, the roof of green bamboo tiles. A clump of palm trees stood behind it, etched black against the golden gaudiness of the sunset, and the mountain ranges of cloud that had gathered there, announcing the imminence of the monsoon.

There was something fascinating and a little frightening about the joss house. Through the open doorway, in the dim shadows they could see the outlines of huge images, unbeautiful, with staring eye-balls. Joss sticks burned there standing in cigarette tins, and dusty paper flowers. There was something eerie and

forbidding about that dark interior with its shadowy inhabitants. Now and again a slender Chinese would creep in or out, but what exactly happened in there, Lisa had no idea. She had still not met the illusive Mr. Fong, and for her own peace of mind she tried not to think too much about him.

They had handed Steve's letter in, and were on their way home in the gathering twilight, when Ma May stopped suddenly and laid a hand on Lisa's arm.

'Listen !'

Thin and high, eerie and extraordinarily out of place and unlikely coming through that circular doorway from amongst the shadows, came the wail of bagpipes.

Ma May said, ' Mr. Fong is back ! '

And even as she said it, the bagpipe music died in a thin wail. Mr. Fong himself appeared in the circular doorway, like a lantern-slide picture suddenly slipped into place.

ELEVEN

MR. FONG was a short square man, stockily built. His hair, eyes and eyebrows were coal black against his complexion, which was the colour of the best dairy butter. When he smiled, his face broke up into a million wrinkles, and his eyes disappeared altogether. To Lisa he appeared ageless. He could have been sixty. He could have still been in his twenties. There was no saying.

He was spotlessly clean and highly polished from his coal black hair that looked like patent leather, to his orange leather shoes. He was dressed in that complicated form of trousering only Chinamen can arrange, and he wore an excellently cut thick white silk shirt with a battery of fountain pens nestling in the breast pocket. All of gold.

Mr. Fong looked prosperous. His cuff links were star sapphires, translucent and beautiful, and on his finger there glittered and flashed an astounding diamond ring.

'Aha . . .' said Mr. Fong, leaning on the low wall to speak to them. 'Two plitty girls! Very good. Very fine. I like plitty girls.' And he stood aside for them. 'Please ender,' said Mr. Fong. 'Please come in. This is Flank's blide, isn't it? Aha, that is what I thought. Velly plitty girl, too. I got fine and nice wedding pleasant for Flank's plitty blide. . . .'

Lisa caught Ma May's arm, and breathed urgently, 'No, oh no!'

'Better go. Mr. Fong must not be offended,' Ma May whispered. 'It will be all right.'

It was almost dark inside the joss house. The incense burning there made the atmosphere close and oppressive. The enormous images they had caught a glimpse of from the road, loomed up now all about them with mad faces, and protuberant eyes. One was life-sized, a man on a horse. What kind of people, thought Lisa, with a shiver down her spine, must they be who could regard these monstrosities as objects for reverence?

'Don't let's go any further,' she whispered, urgently, controlling with difficulty her desire to turn and run.

'He will not harm,' whispered Ma May, but Lisa could not help noticing that she also kept as close to the doorway as possible. And the smoke from the joss sticks rose, making a cloud about them, stifling and sickly, so that the two girls began to cough, their eyes smarting.

Mr. Fong rolled smoothly off behind one of the shrines. He had a curious gait, as though he ran on little wheels rather than walked on feet. The two girls stood very close together, looking about them, longing to be gone. Apart from themselves and Mr. Fong the joss house appeared to be empty at that hour. There was no sound save the distant brawling of pi-dogs in the bazaar.

Mr. Fong returned with a small leather case in his hand. He beckoned the two girls over to him.

'Now then, you shall see something.'

He touched a spring, and the case opened. The two girls gave an involuntary gasp of sheer surprise. On the white velvet bed lay the most beautiful ring that Lisa had ever seen. Beside it even the fine sapphire Frank had given her looked unimportant and inconspicuous. The large square, beautifully cut aquamarine was set in platinum, and had rose brilliant shoulders. Lying there on the white velvet bed it looked like a drop of the ocean with the sun on it on a summer's day.

Lisa had never before felt the lure of beautiful jewellery. Apart from the things Frank had given her, she had never seen any and certainly she had never seen anything like this. Mr. Fong watched her, amused, his butter-coloured face a mass of small crinkles and wrinkles.

'You like?' he said, obviously delighted with the girls' reaction. 'All light! You take! It is for you. For you, and Frank. Wedding pleasant.'

Lisa instinctively put both her hands behind her.

'No, oh no. But thank you all the same. I cannot possibly.'

'Worth plenty money,' said Mr. Fong, and he looked at it fondly. 'Five thousand, pelaps six thousand luepes. . . .' He held it out to her. 'Never mind. I velly lich man. You take!'

Ma May gave Lisa a little poke. 'You'd better take it. Frank would wish it. You must not offend Mr. Fong.'

'Lucky also,' he went on, and he took her hand and slipped it on to her finger. 'Blinging plenty good fortune to wearer.'

He bent close to admire it, and for a moment she was enveloped in the rich odour of jasmine and coco-nut oil.

'It's—beautiful,' she said breathlessly, fascinated, and at the same time repelled and wanting only to be gone. But Ma May's warning restrained her. Mr. Fong must not be offended. She must try to like him, however difficult it was, because she had the uncomfortable feeling that if she did not like him, Mr. Fong would know. To that extent at least she fell under his spell.

So she thanked him again, and murmured something about Frank being home, and awaiting her, and they turned to go. On one of the shrines close by them lay something that looked, in the half light, like a dead dog, its legs dangling. . . . Lisa gave a little cry of horror, but Mr. Fong laughed.

'Only bagpipes,' he said, and he picked them up and began to blow, filling the bag. The silence was broken by a moan, and then a high thin wail, and Mr. Fong began to play. 'The flowers of the forest are all wi'd away' was the tune, but neither of the girls knew that. The music followed them out into the gathering darkness, and all the way up the village street.

'Oh dear,' said Lisa in a half whisper, as though Mr. Fong's ears were so long he could stretch them and hear what was being said even when the girls were more than half-way home. 'Ma May, I do not like Mr. Fong.'

Ma May looked about her apprehensively, as if she, too, half thought there were listeners waiting to carry the news back to their master.

'You must not say that,' she said, very low, and her fingers tightened round Lisa's hand. 'It is necessary while this work is being done, to like Mr. Fong, not to offend him at all.' And she added, her voice lower still, 'I too do not like him very much, and sometimes I think that everybody here is a little frightened of him.'

'I wish he had never given me this ring. I don't care for it. I would like to throw it into the river.'

'You must not do that,' said Ma May, shocked. 'It is worth a very great deal of money as anyone can see. The money might be useful one day,' she said, more wisely than she knew.

'But Frank will soon have plenty of money. . . .'

Ma May said nothing at all. Had she, too, secret doubts about

the beautiful schemes and dreams of fame and fortune? Lisa stole a sidelong glance at her face, but the shadows hid it, and she had no means of knowing. They walked the rest of the way home in silence.

Now the whole landscape was ablaze with the glory of the flowering trees. It was so hot that the two girls rarely went out at all during the day, but in the evening the family would meet together for the evening meal at the parents' house. Frank was working all day down at the new power house, and seemed entirely happy about the progress made there. Saw Win, his brother, helped him. Though he had had no expensive training, he was clever with his hands, and in spite of his lack of education he seemed to have picked up a lot of knowledge about machinery. It was Saw Win who detected the flaw in the crankshaft Mr. Fong had obtained from China. This had caused a certain amount of dislocation down at the works, for the crankshaft had to be repacked, and sent back to China, which meant delay.

'I fear the opening now cannot be until later on. We shall have to choose another date,' said Frank. He went reluctantly to break the news to his father.

'There are plenty of dates,' said the old man.

Lisa was constantly being astonished at their never-failing patience and good humour. At first, because of their raised voices and the excited note that crept into every conversation, she had thought they were always quarrelling. Now that she was learning the language she knew this was not so. In the land of the frangipanni and flamboyant trees, the friendliest conversation sounds to the uninitiated like the outbreak of war.

The family ate their meals of rice and curry off banana leaf plates which they considered far more hygienic than those Frank had brought back with him from England, and used in his own home, washing them after every meal in the river water. Remembering all the things that went into the river, Lisa thought they were probably right. The home dog always joined them, and was given an occasional snack, and as they ate, Frank and his father would talk together excitedly, planning the bigger and better and even more paying schemes they would put into operation once the electric installation was working and the money coming in.

'A road to Mandalay would be a good idea.'

'Or why not a railway? We could easily bring along the railway. Only ten miles of line would be required!'

Then they would get out old maps, forgetting how much the country had changed since the making of them, and trace the routes for railway or for roads along them, with enthusiastic fingers. Rest houses and refreshment rooms sprang up about the landscape as they talked. Mail trains ran through impenetrable jungle. As the railway already in existence between Mandalay and Rangoon was not yet running properly, being shot up by bandits two or three times a month, this development did not seem to Lisa very practical, but she listened, loving them for their enthusiasm and their simplicity, as she had loved little John when he tried, in the Park, to dig a hole and see Australia through it.

Sometimes when these discussions were going on, over the table her eyes would meet those of her brother-in-law, Saw Win, and she often thought she read there some of the tolerant amusement she felt herself, and some of the disbelief. But he never said anything. He took no part in any of these airy discussions, but sat by himself, apart, and now and again, at the end of some excited argument between Frank and his father, he would play a short soft bar of music on the mouth organ Frank had brought him from London, that sounded to Lisa astoundingly like a humorous comment on what had just been said.

It was at one of these family gatherings that Lisa first broached the idea of her school. By now she had managed to talk Frank round and both he and his father embraced the idea with enthusiasm. Indeed, Frank had become so reconciled to the scheme, that he had got quite out of hand, and wanted to launch out in a fashion she never intended.

'We will put up a large and commodious house. There must be running water and all the latest improvements.'

'There must be class rooms with benches as in England.'

'Fong must get us a drawing . . . Fong will know well how a school should be . . . ' said Frank's father.

Lisa put her foot down here, once and for all.

'With our school, Mr. Fong shall have nothing whatever to do. It is ours alone, Ma May's and mine, and we will arrange

it. We begin first in a small and quiet way. At my own house. Then, till we see if it is to be a success or not, no money will be wasted. After that it will be time enough to speak of building.' Frank's father looked crestfallen. He loved plans.

'But Mr. Fong . . .' he began.

'Mr. Fong is already sufficiently busy with the work he has to do,' said Lisa, and she set her soft mouth in a grim and determined line. From his corner Saw Win played a sudden triumphant little bar of music like a cheer.

Steve wrote telling her he had sent off a large packing case containing all the things she had asked him for, and a good many more besides. Gay pictures of animals to hang on the wall, so that the children would learn the names of them. Pictures of other lands and people, so that the children would realize Burma was not the only place in the world. Alphabet bricks and first reading books he sent her, and a great outfit of cotton and needles and such like, because she had said in her letter that Ma May meant to teach them to sew.

'I wish you had told me something about yourself,' he wrote. 'I want to know how you are, and where you are living, and how you like the life.' At least, he thought, I shall have another letter from her, acknowledging the stuff.

She had asked him to tell her how much it all cost, but he insisted the things were a gift. 'Let me do that much for you,' he wrote. 'Any money you make you will need for replacements and wear and tear on your home.'

Not for a moment did he think anything would come of this idea. You couldn't teach jungle people anything, because they did not want to learn.

They started with four children belonging to employees down at the power house. By the end of the week the number had risen to ten, some dropping in for curiosity, to see what was going on, and then deciding to stay, but unless they came with their annas in their hands, Lisa would not admit them. Her common sense told her how little anyone thinks of that which costs them nothing.

The children sat in rows out under the trees, on brightly

coloured mats that Ma May had got cheap in the bazaar. Each day began with hand-washing and a simple lesson in hygiene, and a bathing of sores and inflamed eyes, and a grand cleaning of noses. After that they went on to simple games and songs. Games that Lisa had learned, playing with little John and the other children, on the green grass in Hyde Park, London.

'In and out the window,' and 'What's the time Mr. Fox?' It was amazing how soon the children picked them up and got the idea of what was going on. The difficulties that arose were all unlooked-for ones.

First, the Venerable Hpoongyi up at the Monastery objected to a school run by a white woman, and a long bicker began about that. A bicker in which Frank, surprisingly, did not support her.

'We must not offend the Reverend,' he said, looking apprehensive.

'But in his school he does not teach little girls. He is a good old man. Surely you can explain to him that little girls need some teaching, too?'

Frank, it seemed, could not explain. He was bothered and uneasy.

Next came the children of the Postmaster, an ill conditioned couple dressed in ragged European clothes. They stationed themselves on the outskirts of the coco-nut grove where Lisa held her classes, and shouted insulting remarks, made disgusting noises, mocking and mouthing at the children inside. When Lisa went to remonstrate they threw a coco-nut at her. Even Ma May's usual authority was no good in this case. The children of the Postmaster spat at her. For a while the fate of Lisa's little school dithered on the verge of disaster.

Then Steve's big packing case arrived, full of pencils, books, pictures and coloured strips for cutting out. At the last moment he had added, of his own accord, a gramophone and a number of records of nursery rhymes.

The school attendance shot up to thirty. Ma May had to hasten to the bazaar to buy more mats. Lisa unpacked the gramophone, and put on a record!

Lavender's blue, dilly-dilly
Lavender's green . .

How odd it sounded out there under the palm trees. The news went round that the white Thakinma had a singing voice in a box—and the number of pupils shot up to forty paid up and seated, and a number of others, the timid kind, standing afar off and listening, thumb in mouth.

Then they struck another snag.

Along came the Postmaster, a shifty looking individual of nationality so mixed it was difficult to say which had won. He wore a singlet full of holes, and a very dirty white *dhoti*, and he said there was duty of thirty rupees to pay on the goods. He presented Lisa with a lengthy document written in Burmese which he knew she could not read. It looked like a long strip of knitting.

‘Duty?’ she said, and she eyed him so sternly that he quailed a little. ‘There is no duty on goods between here and Rangoon. This is nonsense.’

‘Customs duty on foreign goods,’ said the Postmaster. ‘Must be paid.’

‘Duty is paid when goods come into a country, not when they go from one side of it to the other.’

The Postmaster stuck to his point.

‘These are foreign goods. They come into Rangoon from other country like you say. Therefore must pay duty. Thirty rupees.’ He added that he was a poor man.

‘I do not know what you are talking about,’ Lisa said. ‘I shall pay you nothing. Please to go away. I have many children to look after.’

‘Pay up or I stay,’ said the Postmaster. Lisa turned away angrily.

‘You can stay as long as you like but I pay you nothing,’ she said, and to put an end to any further conversation she put on a record and wound the gramophone up.

Now you’re married you must obey
You must be kind in all you say
You must be wise, you must be good
And keep your wife in kindling wood.

The children did not know what the words meant, but they jumped up and down, clapping their hands to the music. The

Postmaster squatted on the ground under a bamboo clump. He passed away the time picking up handfuls of the dry sandy soil and letting it trickle slowly through his fingers. A pastime, thought Lisa, that must surely pall before long. When next she looked, he was still there, watching the children with his head slightly on one side, reminding her of a not particularly lovable dog that thinks it hears afar off its master's voice.

When next she remembered him, and looked, he had gone.

Frank was upset when she told him what had happened.

'Of course we shall have to pay him the money.'

'Frank!' she said horrified. 'How can you say it? It is not right.'

'You do not understand, my darling. This Postmaster is a very difficult man, and he has much power. He is also a friend of Mr. Fong, and so must not be offended.'

'Mr. Fong. . . Mr. Fong. . . I am tired to death of hearing this talk of your fine Mr. Fong. . . I do not like him at all.'

There. It was out! She stood looking at her husband defiantly, half afraid now that she had said it. Frank looked about him apprehensively, as if he too was half afraid Mr. Fong might have a listening post somewhere.

'You must not say that, my darling. You must be careful as we are careful, until the business is satisfactorily concluded. It is unwise to make enemies at a time like this, and if the Postmaster is offended and angry he can make matters very difficult for us. He will not deliver letters!'

Lisa looked at him, hardly believing she heard aright.

'You mean he will destroy them?'

'I do not know what he will do with them,' said Frank unhappily. 'All I know is that if we anger Postmaster we shall not get them. What can we do, my darling? You can see how it is here just now. No police to call in. No Commissioner to go to with any complaints there may be. No law, no jail. No judges to decide matters. Everyone must just do the best they can, therefore we must pay Postmaster and have peace.'

'I refuse to do such a bad thing. I shall not pay because it is not right. Pay this time, and don't you see, there will be no end to it. It will be pay this, pay that. They will be always thinking of ways to get money.'

'It is better to pay than to argue. This Postmaster is a very strange fellow.'

'I also can be strange,' said Lisa firmly. 'I shall go myself and talk to him. I shall tell him the things are mine and that you have nothing to do with it whatever, and that I do not mean to pay him one pice, or anna.'

He is a Government servant. He can ruin us. When a Government servant demands some money it is always best to give it to him and to say nothing at all.'

Lisa's soft mouth folded into the grim line Frank was beginning to recognize.

'It is not right and so I shall not do it,' she said.

'You cannot understand how it is out here today,' said Frank unhappily. 'In Rangoon the uncle has been fined for dangerous driving at a time when his car was stationary at the roadside and another chap has run into him in a bus. Why? Because my uncle does not belong to the right political party. My uncle has taken council's advice and they tell him, "You pay or there will be bus strike and the Government will lose many votes." That is how it is here today in my country. One day, of course, it will be better. One day people will have some courage, and stand up to these people.'

Lisa said, 'Well, I am going to have courage and stand up to the Postmaster at once. Now. Without waiting for any someday.'

She walked along the dusty village street to the post office that evening. As she passed the joss house she could see a dim light burning there, and the distant wail of bagpipes told her Mr. Fong was within. She hurried by, aware of the old sense of foreboding. The dingy red brick building of the post office was liberally festooned with cobwebs, and she saw that two of the letters painted on the front of it had fallen off since she was last there, so that the notice now read PO . . OFFICE.

Inside the whole place was inches deep in the pink laterite dust that drifted in through the windows. The grille that ran along the counter was red with rust. The mail bags, tattered and very dirty, lay heaped in the centre of the floor. On the counter lay two dead pens, and an ink bottle full of dead ants, beside a scrap

of rag that turned out to be blotting paper that had once been green. On the walls, surprisingly, Royalty of all nations looked down from fly-blown and faded posters. These included the late King George and Queen Mary, Mussolini, Queen Juliana of the Netherlands, and a highly coloured advertisement for Mazawattee Tea.

The Postmaster squatted in the centre of this bower in a cosy nest made of the mail bags. He was reading a tattered newspaper and smoking a long green cheroot.

He looked up when he saw her. 'Well, haloo !' he said, but Lisa noted that some of his bounce had deserted him. He looked slightly apprehensive.

'I have come to tell you I will pay you no money whatever. It is not right for you to ask me for it, nor is it the law. Any duty that had to be paid, was already paid to the Customs when the goods came off the ship. If you cannot let me have these things without payment, then I shall pack them up and return them to Rangoon saying what has happened.'

The Postmaster looked startled. He spat skilfully over the mail bags and out on to the veranda.

'You will not pay ?' he said but the truculent note had gone and he avoided looking at her.

'No.'

'You do not consider it is right to pay, therefore you will not do it. That is exactly how it is ?'

'That is exactly how it is,' she said, and she took a seat on the counter beside the dirty blotting paper and the dead pens, hoping to indicate to him that, like himself, she too could wait.

The Postmaster sat for a while lost in thought. Then he cleared his throat purposefully and very thoroughly.

'All right,' he said, suddenly. 'I make bargain. I have some children. Two. One boy, one girl. Boy not old enough for Hpoongyi *chaung* yet. Very wicked and bad children. Foul and unobeying. You take into your school without money to pay, and make some improvements and all will be well. I will let your parcels come also without money to pay.'

'So that is how you arrange things in this country,' she said. 'By blackmailing.'

The Postmaster was unabashed. He nodded. 'That is the way. Business plans,' he said.

'I thought you did not like my school. You have sent your children along to make nuisances of themselves to us.'

'Now that I have seen the music and the playing, I think it a good idea. Children very happy. Music very pretty. All right? You take?'

She would dearly have liked to refuse and to throw his horrible children back in his face, but she felt that here was a way of gaining her point, and at the same time mollifying Frank. If the Postmaster's children were in her school, he would have to deliver their letters.

She said slowly, 'Yes. I will take them, as long as they behave themselves. But there must be no more shouting, and throwing coco-nuts and trouble-making.'

'O.K.,' said the Postmaster. 'If you find it bothersome, just beat.' It was only then that Lisa noticed he wore behind one ear, one of the bright yellow pencils that had come out of Steve's packing case. He must have pinched it off her desk that morning, when she wasn't looking. She turned, glad to be gone, disliking him intensely. He called after her from the doorway:

'Their names are Alice and Leslie.' Then he picked up his paper, took a toothpick from behind his other ear, and read, picking his teeth energetically.

After the Postmaster's children were enrolled the numbers mounted so sharply that Lisa and Ma May held a conference. Something would have to be done to limit the size of the classes. Presently the rains would break, and then they would have to take no more children than they could get into, and under, the little house.

'You must raise the fees,' Frank told her. 'That will choke many off.'

San Win had put up bamboo matting under the house, screening it from the weather, making an extra class room. Mr. Fong had also been helpful with some wooden cupboards which he brought along on the back of his large green car.

'For you,' he said, smiling at her. 'I like to help plitty girl.'

The cupboards were not much use, being hanging cupboards. But Saw Win came round one night, and without saying a word

to anyone, fitted them all up with wooden shelves, so that they would take the gramophone and records, the pencils and paper and books.

It was about this time that Mr. Fong began to take his embarrassing interest in the school. It seemed to Lisa he was always there, his shadow, more than life-size, cast across the compound. She would look up from a song with action she was teaching the children, and there he would be, spotless and butter-coloured, his dark hair shining like patent leather in the sun, his arms folded. Watching them.

'Plitty. . . Velly plitty,' said Mr. Fong, applauding loudly at the end of the record. 'I like to see it.'

On his last visit to Rangoon he had bought himself a black beret. This gave him an odd, Continental appearance. He had also added to the collection of jewellery he wore, a large square-cut emerald ring.

'Jewellery always best investment,' he told them.

Mr. Fong obviously had plenty of money.

'I wish he would keep away,' Lisa said urgently to Frank. 'I don't like to see him always there. How is it he has the time? You and Saw Win are always working very hard.'

'Just now he is waiting for some more machinery.'

'Then why does he not go and fetch it?'

Frank said gently, 'My darling, you are always a little unfair to poor Mr. Fong, who likes you so much. Always he is saying to me how lucky I am in my beautiful wife, and then, remember the very fine ring he gave to you.'

'I wish you would give it back to him. I don't want anything of his.'

If Frank heard what she said, he pretended not to. Long after she was to remember that. She had thrown to him a life line, and he did not take it.

In April and early May it was too hot to work, too hot almost to move. The flowers in the garden Saw Win had dug and planted for them, withered and died, and all the countryside took on the yellow burnt-up colour of marie-biscuit. The two girls decided to close their school until the monsoon broke. They spent the long days closeted together, planning their finances, and making out programmes of work for the re-opening in June.

Saw Win got some kush-grass shades, and hung them over the windows and the doorways, and showed Lisa how to throw water from a water pot on them before the sun got up, so that when the air came through them it was pleasantly cooled.

The astonishing thing was, that raising the fees had done nothing whatever to keep their numbers down. Even more parents now wanted to send their children, with the fees risen to eight annas each a week—on the principle that since it was so expensive, education must be worth having.

The two girls made out a waiting list. 'For naturally there will be some of them die in the rains,' said Ma May, 'then we shall have places free.'

Lisa looked at her shocked at this calm acceptance of disaster. Even in the dippy camp, they had not liked to see children die.

'If only we could get a larger house,' Lisa sighed. If only, she thought, the hateful Mr. Fong would disappear, and the fine wooden bungalow on the hill fall empty. It was no good thinking of things like that.

'If only we could take more teachers,' said Ma May. 'Many girls who were with me at Mission school would like to come. They keep asking me, "Ma May, Ma May, have you for us no job?" All are clever girls, but there is no work for them to do in a place like this.'

'Maybe when the power station is finished and working,' Lisa thought, 'Mr. Fong will go at last. Then we can move into the big house on the hill.'

Amazing as it appeared, they had money in hand. She sent twenty rupees to Steve, and asked him for painting books, coloured chalks, and skipping ropes.

This time Lisa had no trouble whatever with the Postmaster. He not only let her parcels come through without interference, he brought them up and delivered them himself in his dilapidated van. He did stipulate, however, that he should be given one painting book for his children to use at home, and after deep thought, he chose one with satisfying pictures of large steam engines on every page.

Next time Lisa visited the post office she came upon him sitting on the veranda, his tongue out, painstakingly colouring one of the engines himself, in chalks.

'At least he asked for it, and did not simply help himself,' Lisa thought, and it seemed to her that was a sign of grace in the Postmaster.

Steve had been in bed when Lisa's letter came. Malaria was an old enemy, and it had pounced on him after a trip up country. He was still shaky and yellow with mepacrine when he went down to get the things for her from the big bazaar. He had kept her note under his pillow for three days before they let him out, and had got some kind of comfort from the feel of it there. Every night he hoped he might dream of her, and opened endless doors in an effort to find her behind one of them. But he never did, and his nights were made hideous by nightmares in which he floated light as a feather up amongst the clouds, and despaired of every getting back to earth again. 'Come to me in my dreams, and then, by day I shall be well again,' the poet said, but it never worked out that way for Steve.

The only dreams he ever had were wild and restless ones in which he searched for Lisa through windy passages of empty houses, or pursued her down dark lanes. In these fevered dreams it always seemed he was wearing boots made of lead, so that to lift a foot was a colossal effort he was hardly capable of. And always as he opened the final door, and thought he had found her at last, it would be his cousin sitting there with her husband in the house in Charles Street, and he would be bitterly aware that for all his struggles he had got no place at all.

Or sometimes in his dream he was back in the hospital, and the bandages covered his eyes and all his face, and he lay waiting for Lisa to come, as he had once waited for Stella. But this time, he thought, it will be different, for Lisa will come, and she will stand by me. She won't leave me. . . .

And the steps would sound on the long cement passage again, and the door would open, just as it had done of old, and he raised himself in his blindness on one elbow and tried to say her name—and he lay there, panting and waiting. Surely she would come to him now, and put her small cool hand in his, and place her cheek against his bandaged face. Then I shall be well again, he thought.

There was only silence, and somewhere far off a high wind

blowing, that presently would wake him by slamming the shutters over the window of his room. And he would lie there alone, shivering and burning alternately.

'You must have a break,' his doctor said. 'I've got an aircraft going up to Mandalay on Friday. Go to Mandalay. It's not much of a place nowadays. It still smells of burning, but it would be a change of air and scenery.'

Mandalay! Within a day's journey by road of where Lisa lived. He looked it up on his ordnance map. There was a rest house of some sort there. He could hire a car and drive over, taking the chance of someone having a pot shot at him on the way.

'I wouldn't go gadding about there much, if I were you. The country is still pretty unsettled. They blew up another train last night, I hear.'

Steve nodded, saying nothing. He was thinking 'Why not?' At worst it would assuage his anxiety about her, his longing to know in what circumstances she was living and if she was well and happy and not just tolerating her curious circumstances with a good heart. Maybe it wasn't a wise move, but his longing for news of her was more than, in his weakened condition, he could cope with.

He did not tell her he was coming.

'Now then, I have got some good news for you at last,' said Frank when he came in for the evening meal one night. The rains had broken, and he came paddling through his garden with his *loungyi* tucked up, like a little boy. It was cooler now, but Lisa found the damp distressing. Her long thick hair was never dry. Mildew formed on shoes and furniture, and everything felt sticky to the touch.

She smiled at him, and handed him his little green bowl of curry with its curiously shaped china spoon. 'And what may your good news be!'

'Mr. Fong hopes the power house will be ready and finished first week in September, and we can therefore plan to have the grand gala opening at the same time as the Festival of Lanterns, for what better time could there be for light switch on than this festival of lights? You will certainly love it, for it is a very

beautiful and peculiar Feast and this year it will be doubly gorgeous for instead of the small little candles as before, all the illuminations will be from the new electrical installation. High-priest, my father will turn on the switch and all the countryside is lit up. The Venerable Hpoongyi has already had lights fixed up the pagoda so that when lit, it will be seen for many miles.'

His gentle face glowed with the prospect of all this glory and she could not find it in her heart to damp his pleasure with her own uneasy doubts. After all, she might well be quite wrong. And certainly it was a good thing Mr. Fong had given them a definite date at last. There had been so much procrastination and uncertainty. Even Frank's father had lately become a little depressed by the constant difficulties, the never-ceasing demand for more money. The defective crankshaft had to be replaced. A fly-wheel arrived from China badly flawed. It had been partially erected when Saw Win detected the crack. Then some brickwork on the river bank cost twice as much as had originally been estimated, on account of the foundations not being adequate, so that at the first high tide of the monsoon, a lot of it fell into the river.

Sometimes Mr. Fong joined them, when he was at home, in the parents' house for the evening meal. Under cover of the music from Frank's flute, and the little guitar his father played, Mr. Fong would talk to Lisa softly. However hard she tried to get away from him, somehow or other he always managed to edge round to where she was.

'Why you never wear ling I give you?' demanded Mr. Fong.

'I don't wear jewellery when I am working.'

'But you don't work now!'

She said nothing, keeping her face turned from him, aware that the lamplight threw his shadow right across her so that she could not escape it.

'Plitty girl like you should not work. Plitty girl should mally lich man, sit home, wear plitty clothes, drive in big motor car...'

'I don't like sitting at home doing nothing,' she said and then, aware that Frank was watching her anxiously, she tried hard to be natural and friendly with him and talk to him about her school.

'Plitty girl shouldn't keep school, teaching other people's

babies. Plitty girl should have babies of her own,' said Mr. Fong.

Sometimes he brought his bagpipes with him, and stood with his back to the storm clouds and the wild sky and the river, and played them tunes of another land. Frank's father and mother admired Mr. Fong very much and appeared to find even the loud and unmusical wail of the bagpipes beautiful. Lisa much preferred to hear Saw Win play the mouth organ. He played softly and sweetly, the strange tinkling Burmese music that is never written down, but handed on from family to family, and today is being rapidly swamped and forgotten under the impact of boogie-woogie and jazz.

Neither Frank's father nor mother thought anything at all of Saw Win's music. It hadn't cost anything to teach it to him. Even Frank looked surprised when Lisa said she preferred it to Mr. Fong's noises. Surprised, and disappointed. He wanted her to like and appreciate Mr. Fong.

'It is only because you do not understand him, my darling. When you get to know him better you will like him more.'

'I don't want to know him better,' she said stubbornly.

'He is a clever man, and he is a very good contractor. It would not be good for us,' he said anxiously, 'if the contractor became offended.'

He was trying, she knew, in his gentle fashion to ask her to be a little more friendly to Mr. Fong, but try as she would, the small cold fear had continued to grow in her heart. A fear she had to keep to herself. A fear she dare not confess even to Frank. For a long time she had struggled against it, telling herself she was foolish, that it was all her imagination. Telling herself firmly she was becoming one of those stupid young women who imagine that every man who looks at them desires them.

In her heart she knew this was not imagination. Mr. Fong had taken to looking at her, whenever they were alone together, in a fashion there was no misunderstanding. He had taken to talking to her in a manner she did not at all like, and her position was made impossible, because, for Frank's sake, she dared not openly offend him.

'Why you go mally this Flank?' Mr. Fong asked scornfully. 'Not good enough man for blootiful girl like you. Not plop-per man at all.' He laughed cruelly and unkindly. 'You

should mally lich man. . . . Have fine house. . . . Good servants. Here are only small stupid peoples. . . . Peasants. . . .’

He stood watching her, picking his teeth with a match.

They were standing at the entrance to the joss house, where he had waylaid her. The scent of the burning joss sticks drifted out to them, pungent and bitter. It made her feel sick and she pushed the wet hair back off her forehead, and longed to be gone.

‘When the power house is finished and everything is working properly, we shall no doubt get a better house.’ She longed to say, ‘When you have gone we shall get your house. Go, please go!’

Mr. Fong laughed and his eyes disappeared altogether for a moment in his bland butter-coloured face.

‘Yes, yes. . . . Then evelyting will be fine and evelyone will be lich, isn’t it. Still, you would do better to come to China. Hong Kong. . . . Shanghai. . . . Bleautiful places. . . . Much money. . . . Many flowers. . . . Plitty girl get plenty good time there!’

‘I have a very good time here,’ she said, moving away from him, wondering how she could be gone without being definitely rude.

‘How many jewels there. Shining, lovely. Far better than ling I give you. Why not come in and look? Inside I got many fine things! I like to show you!’

She swallowed aware of sick fear arising in her.

‘Oh no . . . I can’t possibly. I have to get home . . .’ she said. Mr. Fong laughed and moved closer to her. For a moment she thought he was going to take hold of her and pull her in through the beautiful oval doorway. And then, suddenly, his face changed and he moved away, and before she knew why, she heard coming down the street, the soft melodious music of a mouth organ played softly, and there was Saw Win.

He grinned at her, and said nothing at all, but waited for her to join him. Mr. Fong faded into the shadows amongst the joss sticks and the images, and Lisa was aware that suddenly she wanted to cry.

She was bitterly afraid of Mr. Fong. And she dare not tell Frank she was afraid. If Saw Win hadn’t come along just then, she thought, and preferred not to think any further.

TWELVE

L was sitting alone on the wooden veranda of her little house, when Steve came. She looked up, and saw him standing in the garden, and thought for a moment it was something she was dreaming. In the unearthly evening light of a monsoon evening he looked gaunt and ill, and yellow still with mepacrine, the scars of his many operations standing out livid, as they did when he wasn't well, on his face.

He could not disguise his astonishment and horror at finding her here. He had pictured her living in a decent wooden house, with some of life's amenities. The little mat house raised on sticks in the coco-nut grove on the river bank, was nothing but a shack such as peasants live in.

He stammered, 'You can't live like this. How can you bear it?' and there was black rage and almost hatred in his heart for the first time, for Frank who had done this to her. She put down her work and came down the wooden steps towards him. She put out a hand and touched his arm, to make quite sure he was true. Then she laughed softly.

'But you do not know,' she said. 'Come and see. You will find it is not so bad.'

He followed her into the little house, and had to own that it was not so bad. The room was neat and pretty as a country caravan, with roses on the chintz of covers and curtains. The floor was covered with bright rugs they sell in the bazaar. In one corner of the little room a large earthenware pot had been painted white, and held orange and cream and salmon cannas and lilies. Out of unpromising enough materials, he saw she had made a home, as a woman can.

The frangipanni made a white hedge against the pewter coloured water of the river, and shed its white flowers in a last blossoming on the grass. A sampan creaked by, its occupants mirrored in the still waters of the ebb tide, and Steve knew suddenly that a man could be utterly and entirely happy and at peace here, and that most of the thousand and one things civiliza-

tion has taught people they must have, are life's excess baggage.

She brought him a long cold drink.

'Why have you come?' she said. 'It was not wise. You have been ill. . . .'

'I've been very worried about you.'

'There was no need to worry,' she said. 'With me, all is well. Better, I think, than with you.' And her heart was sick with pity for him. So they sat, not touching one another, the width of the little room between them, and Steve leaned back in his long chair, watching her.

She talked to him of her school.

'Many were at first against us. The priests at the Monastery at first did not like it, but we have talked to the old Hpoongyi and now he does not make any trouble for us but allows us to teach the very small boys and the little girls. Then there was other trouble,' she said, and she smiled, remembering the Postmaster, and let it go at that.

'And you? I want to know about you. Are you happy? Is he kind to you?' He cared very little about the school.

'Frank kind?' she said, and she looked at him surprised. 'How could he be anything but kind! I am not unhappy. Everyone is so good to me, and as you see, I have a pleasant home, who never had anywhere of my own before. I am very happy.'

She hesitated for the ghost of a minute, her eyes clouded, watching a line of white paddy birds that went winging over the face of the grey water. A few drops of rain fell suddenly, heavily on the roof.

'But I do not like the Chinaman,' she said very low.

His eyes narrowed, remembering.

'That's the contractor, isn't it?'

She nodded, not looking at him. Feeling that in a way it was disloyal to Frank to speak of it at all.

'I do not think he is a good man but I cannot say so. Everyone here likes him very much indeed—except perhaps Saw Win, Frank's brother. I do not think he likes him either but he also cannot speak of it.'

'Why not?'

'He has no education, therefore the parents do not think highly

of him, but I think he knows many things they do not know. Frank's father has given the Chinaman all his money to invest in this business of the electricity, all the time he asks for more and more.'

Steve's mouth was suddenly grim.

'It's the sort of thing that is happening all over' Burma today. Give me a few details and I'll see if I can find anything out for you. The department I work in handles just this sort of thing.'

'But you must not speak of it to Frank. Not until you have inquired. He would be very angry with me for telling you. He likes you so much. It is a pity he is not here to see you.'

'Where is he?'

'He has gone down the river shooting and will not return till tomorrow. He has gone with his brother to try the fine English gun he brought out with him.'

'Not too safe to go plodding round the countryside with a gun these days, is it?' Steve said roughly. A gun was currency. With a gun a man could be a king for a little while, in unadministered country. Until his ammunition gave out.

Lisa laughed softly.

'Frank does not think the dacoits would hurt him or any of his family. They are benefactors, bringing electric light to the whole district. They are very well known.'

'And you are here alone?'

'Oh no. I have two good servants, and a friend, Ma May, who stays with me.'

The silence lengthened between them. He said roughly, 'I had better go.'

'Yes. You must go.'

He knelt impulsively beside her, his face hidden against her.

'Lisa, let me take you away. This is no fit life for you. Let me take you away before something dreadful happens to you. I can't rest with you living like this. I can't bear it.'

Very gently she pushed him from her and got up and walked away to the veranda.

'No, Steve,' she said quietly. 'What I have done, I have done. This is now my life. I know very well these people are not my people, but they took me in. They were good to me when I had no one, and nothing of my own. With you it would have been

different—much better, I know, because I could have loved you in another way. Like a woman loves a man—not as now like a woman loves dear children.'

'You could have loved me like that?' he said, very low. 'In spite of my face?'

'Your face?' she said, not understanding him, and then she put her two hands out and held him for a moment. 'I love your face as it is,' she said.

'This isn't the end. It can't be,' he said. 'I shall go on hoping that someday, somehow, our time will come. It must come. All this is just my punishment that I have to live through. Because I hadn't the courage—that night in London—to take what I wanted.'

'Maybe it will come,' she said. 'But not yet. Not now. We have to do the things that must be done. Go, and God be with you.'

Frank returned the following evening in high spirits. His good English gun had worked. He brought back with him a little string of jungle fowl hanging from his shooting stick like a collection of child's toys. When he heard Steve had been he was mortified at having missed him.

'It is too bad. I like that chap. Why could he not stay? You should not have let him go, my darling.'

Lisa laughed, looking round the tiny house.

'I do not know where I could have put him,' she said ruefully.

'He is well used to camping, I am sure. He could have had a bed on the veranda. He works now in British Embassy at Rangoon, I think. Up here on Embassy business, no doubt.'

'I never asked him,' Lisa said simply, and then because her conscience had been bothering her ever since Steve left, she said impulsively, 'I asked him to make some inquiries for us about Mr. Fong, Frank. The department he works in at the Embassy has to do with foreigners who come over here to do business. It would be a good idea if we could know something more than we do, I think.'

She broke off, for Frank's face had clouded as it always did when she spoke of the Chinaman.

'Mr. Fong ! Mr. Fong ! Always you are worrying yourself about this Mr. Fong, my darling. What is there to find out ? We know he is a good fellow and a clever engineer who is about to make our fortunes for us. He has even now just given us a definite date for the installation to come into production and burst into work. My father has only today told this to me. It will be on the occasion of the Festival of Lights, and what could be more fitting. After that, Mr. Fong will go to his own country. I have already told you that—but for the little while still he is here, please, my darling, to be kind to him and not ask about any inquiries.'

She said nothing more, hating to bother him, and he was soon off again on one of his airy dreams.

'My father and I have decided that we will have *pwes* and roundabouts and swinging chairs from Rangoon, with horses to ride on, and this in itself will make much money for people will come from far and wide about the countryside. You will see. Never will such a fine festival have been known in these parts. You must enjoy it with us and not worry about Mr. Fong. He is a good chap. Only today he has informed us of a friend of his who will purchase rice mill and cement works from us. True, the price is not a very fine one, but then a bird in the hand is better than a dirty poke in the eye with a stick, as you say.'

'Frank, it's not Mr. Fong himself who is buying it, is it ?' she said horrified. Her heart sank at the prospect of having the Chinaman as a neighbour for ever.

'No. I have told you. A friend. He will come later to do all the discussing with my father.'

She caught at his two hands.

'Frank, will you listen to me. For one little time. I do not very often beg of you.'

'But my darling, of course. What is it ? You distress yourself. Tell me what you wish ?'

'Don't sell the mill or the cement works to Mr. Fong or to anyone, until we hear from Steve, what he has to tell us. What he finds out. Please, please, Frank, do this for me. . . .'

'But naturally. Of course I will do it,' said Frank. 'For you, I will do anything. Nothing shall be done, my darling. Nothing whatever. Until you give all clear !'

Steve's letter took some weeks to reach her. The rains had turned the paddy fields into great lakes now, and old men sat in front of their houses, their legs dangling over the wooden platforms catching large fish in what recently had been parched fields, baked dry and cracked with heat. The river rose. It swirled by the little mat house in the coco-nut grove hungrily, carrying away chunks of the bank on every flood tide.

'It won't wash the house away, will it?' Lisa asked Frank apprehensively, and he turned and regarded the flood somewhat doubtfully himself.

'I do not think so,' he said. He had just come in bringing Steve's letter, which had been a month on the way.

'But why?' asked Lisa. 'From Rangoon in the aeroplane is only some hours.'

Steve's letter began simply with the date. Lisa stood in front of the house, to read it, the roar of the river in her ears.

'"You have good reason for the doubts you spoke of,"' Lisa read. '"The man is entirely unreliable and has already had to leave Rangoon to escape a prison sentence for fraud. If he ever returns to the capital, or ventures into administered territory he will be arrested at once. For goodness sake warn your in-laws and tell them to look carefully into matters, and not to part with any more money. Also tell them to see they get receipts and full account of all that is spent on the new works, and receipts, etc. for the machinery installed."'

Frank listened patiently as Lisa read this aloud to him, her voice shaking, for was it not exactly as she had feared? He sat with his hands spread on his knees, his kind purple-brown eyes watching her face. He did not appear to be at all bothered or put out, and when she had come to the end, and looked up at him hopelessly, he slapped his knees, and laughed.

'But, my darling, all this we know very well. Mr. Fong most carefully told me the story long before we started to negotiate with him or do business, don't you see? Without a doubt he said it would come to our ears from someone who wished him ill. For this man you have just learned about in Rangoon is not our Mr. Wu Fong, but another Mr. Ah Fong. His brother. Our Mr. Fong is very ashamed of him, and has told the whole story to us, hiding nothing.'

She said with a catch in her voice, 'Oh, Frank, are you quite sure!'

'Of course I am sure, my darling. We are all sure. If it had not been true, why should Mr. Fong ever have mentioned it to us at all? There was no reason for him to do it. He could have hidden it up from us.'

'But as he said, someone else might have told you.'

'So doesn't it prove to you that Mr. Fong is an honest man, since he told us himself!' cried Frank. 'Why are you so unkind to Mr. Fong, who admires you so much and thinks so highly of you? Every time I see him he says how fortunate I am to have a beautiful wife.'

She opened her mouth to say something, and could not say it.

'Just wait. When all the money comes rolling in and we are rich, you too will give thanks to Mr. Fong.'

As always when she tried to argue with him, his beautiful trust and belief in all human nature made her feel vaguely ashamed of her own suspicions. It might well be that Frank, in his trustfulness, was right, and there had been another Mr. Fong. She turned away folding the letter, and was about to slip it into her pocket, when Frank took it from her. He tore it up into very small pieces, and the pieces into still smaller bits, and then he took a match and burned it all up, so that nothing remained but a little heap of black ash.

'Best not have such things about where someone could find it,' he said hurriedly. 'Moreover, it would be best, my darling, not to speak to anyone of this, or discuss our friend with others. It might come to the ears of Mr. Fong in one way or another way, and cause distress and worry just now.'

There was, as he said this, a certain cautious apprehension that came over his gentle face, so that Lisa knew for the first time, and without any doubt, that in his heart Frank was a little afraid of Mr. Fong, just as she was. Not certain that, if thwarted or upset, he might not become spiteful and troublesome.

In the second month of the rains they almost had to close the school because of the floods. The river rose so high that it sent little tributaries flowing out that flooded the place beneath the house that had been turned into a schoolroom. There was no

room to accommodate all the children upstairs. For one thing, the flimsy little house would have collapsed with the weight of them.

Frank came back one morning all enthusiasm, when Lisa and Ma May were struggling with this problem.

'Here is a good idea, my darling, which is going to solve everything. This kind Mr. Fong has come to me, and has offered to lend you his good wooden house that is always free of water, to hold the school classes in every morning. Now, don't you think that a good idea?'

He stood there beaming at her so happily, that she hated having to dash his hopes.

'No,' she said firmly. 'I am sorry, Frank. I do not want to go there. This is our school, mine and Ma May's, and I do not want Mr. Fong to have anything to do with it!'

'But, my darling, you are unreasonable. See all the water that is here. And presently I fear there may be more.'

Lisa looked round unhappily. Already the tree boles nearest the river stood in a lake. But she knew she would rather shut her school altogether, than go to the Chinaman's house. Already, far more often than she cared about, she would look up from her work and see him standing, uncreased and immaculate, under a large black European umbrella. Watching her.

'No . . . ' she said again, 'I will not go up there.'

'But Mr. Fong will be very offended,' said Frank unhappily.

'Then Mr. Fong must be offended, I am afraid. You must think of some good and polite excuse to tell him.'

In the end help came from the last direction they thought of looking for it. On a dismal day when the sky seemed to be tied to the earth by a forest of silver cords, Ma May and Lisa were wading about dismally rescuing small wooden tables, and mats and other bits of school equipment from the flood, discussing sadly the inevitability of closing the school till the dry weather came again. They were chattering as they worked, so busily that it was some time before they realized they were not alone. Ma May saw the visitor first, and gave a little gasp of surprise, and touched Lisa's arm.

'Look. Coming here. The Venerable Saya Kadaw from the Monastery.'

Like a bird of prey the old man came wading through the water, his thin legs exposed by his tucked-up garments, his shaved bare bullet-head bent against the rain. In one hand he carried a dripping orange umbrella, while the other struggled with his voluminous draperies. Lisa gulped nervously. More trouble, she thought. She was secretly afraid of the grim old man who had been so obstructive when she started her school, and her heart missed a beat at his sudden appearance.

She dried her hands on her apron and went out politely into the rain to meet him. He waved her back, and joined the two girls under the house.

'Too much water,' he said genially, furling his sodden umbrella and she noticed that his face, when he smiled, had a peculiar sweetness. Dressed in other clothes, he might well have been a professor from Oxford or Cambridge, with his thin scholarly face and aquiline nose. He spoke English with a perfect Oxford accent.

His errand, after all, was not one of trouble at all.

'I have watched this work you do with interest,' he said. 'You were quite right, my daughter. It is better for the children to come to you and learn, than to play in the street. So I come to say that if you wish it, during the mornings you can hold your school in the *zayats* up at the Monastery.'

Lisa stared at him, hardly believing she heard aright. How often had she looked longingly at the big airy *zayats* that stood in the Monastery compound, with their good wooden floors and sound roofing, that came down low over the eaves, keeping out rain and sun. Cool and dry they were, and except at feast and festival time, when pilgrims came from other villages, they were usually empty. And there was more to it than that. Her school would gain much face and standing when it became known it had Monastery backing and was approved of and encouraged by the Venerable himself. She stammered her thanks, unable to believe her good fortune, for here was not only shelter for her school, but a first-class excuse to hand to Mr. Fong. The old man waded off again into the rain, bundling his orange robe high to keep it out of the water, and Lisa and Ma May turned and embraced one another, and did an impromptu dance of triumph.

Frank, too, was delighted with the news.

'Mr. Fong, I am sure, will understand that the Monastery is far better for schooling, besides being nearer to town. I have the cleverest wife in the world. Even the Venerable, who may not look at women, approves of her.'

Steve sent her up a further consignment of gramophone records. The Postmaster not only made no difficulties about letting them through, he brought them up himself and insisted on waiting to see them unpacked and to hear them played.

Now from the Monastery grounds, mingled with the echoing note of the prayer bell and the monks' chanting, came the strains of 'The Golliwog's Cake Walk', and the 'Teddy Bear's Picnic', and, their offices over, the monks themselves would cluster round to listen, enthralled. East and West, it seemed, had at last found a meeting place.

After the heat and the glare of the hot weather, Lisa enjoyed the first months of the rains. When the sun has been shining for six months without break, grey skies are restful. It was for her a good spell, a little golden time when her school prospered beyond her wildest hopes, and everything went right. Ma May found assistant teachers to help them, and once again they had to put up their fees, to try and keep numbers down. Except when she remembered Steve standing there gaunt and thin against the grey of the river, she was happier than she had ever been. The peace was increased by the fact that Mr. Fong was away a great deal. Something had gone wrong with another delivery of machinery, and he was in China.

Towards the end of the rains, the golden spell ended. It ended one afternoon when Lisa had reason to go to the post office, and passing the joss house on her way back, some strange compulsion made her turn and look round, and there was Mr. Fong, back from China, immaculate in navy blue against the inclement weather, watching her. Several times during the following days when she looked up from her work in school, she saw him standing outside the *zayat*, sheltering himself with a large black umbrella, just looking. And the uncomfortable idea came to her that Mr. Fong had managed to discover she neither trusted nor liked him, and that she, of all of them, knew

the truth about him. A shiver ran down her spine, and for the first time since her arrival East, she was afraid.

She did not like to be left alone in the little mat house in the coco-nut grove any more, and her position was made more difficult in that she could not tell Frank how she felt. He was working very hard at the time, and came home late and often exhausted. The date of the grand opening of the electrical installation was coming closer, and everybody seemed rushed and a little harassed and anxious. If I can just hold on for the next six weeks, Lisa thought, it will be over and finished with and Mr. Fong will be gone. She had borne it for so long, surely she could put up with another six weeks, till the Festival of Lanterns came, and with it the grand gala opening.

It was not very difficult to arrange never to be alone. Ma May spent most of her days with her and stayed with her whenever Frank had to be away for the night. And once when the two girls were upstairs in the little house alone together, Lisa heard a stirring under the house, and looking out, was surprised to see Saw Win had brought his sleeping mat and blanket, and was preparing to lie down there beside the ginger dog.

'I am the watchman,' he told her, grinning.

'Why has he done that?' Lisa whispered to Ma May. 'We have never needed a watchman.'

'Perhaps he likes to do it. I cannot say. Perhaps he knows something. Here in the village everyone says Saw Win is not very clever, but I think he is clever,' Ma May said slowly.

Lisa wrote to Steve: 'I am not very happy about this story you told me. I believe it may be true but I cannot get anyone else to think so. Also I now have an unhappy feeling that this Mr. Fong knows I have heard something that is not good about him. But how could that be?'

She might never have known if Alice, the Postmaster's unattractive daughter, had not come to school with a little sore on her arm. It grew and grew, in spite of Lisa's treatment, until it was clear it was ringworm, and needed dressing at night as well as in the morning. So, distastefully, because Mr. Fong was at home, and the trip took her past the joss house, Lisa took a bottle of lotion and some lint and went to try and see the

Postmaster's wife and show her how to wash the place, and cover it with a bandage so that other children would not be infected.

It was late afternoon of a grey day, with rain falling like shrapnel on the corrugated iron roof of the post office. Ma May had one of her sewing classes that afternoon, so Lisa had had to come on her own. The rain on the roof made so much noise that nobody heard her come in. At first glance, the office appeared to be empty save for the ragged blotting paper, dead pen, and inkwell full of dried flies. It was not till she reached the counter and looked through the rusty grating that she saw Mr. Fong, spotless and uncreased in his wet weather suit of navy dark silk, his thick hair shining like patent leather, squatting in a little hollow he had made for himself amongst the post bags, patiently going through the letters.

He was apparently looking for one particular one.

He was far too busily engrossed in his task to see her, and she turned and went out quietly into the rain again, feeling suddenly sick, her heart thudding. She went round the side of the office, and to the small wooden godown behind it that was the Postmaster's private house. She had never been there before, and she stood for a moment appalled at the squalor. A distress signal of rags fluttered from the veranda rail. Though the rains were beginning to dry up, the little wooden godown stood in stagnant water in which floated a rich deposit of garbage.

The Postmaster was asleep on his veranda, a newspaper draped over his head to keep off the flies that swarmed everywhere. His wife was a large ungirt woman who listened to Lisa's instructions with a dumb look on her face that obviously meant she had no intention of carrying them out, but thought the whole thing a lot of fiddle-faddle.

The Postmaster awoke just as Lisa was leaving, and doffed his newspaper. He did not seem surprised to see her.

'Aha, so you visit us. How nice. I am taking small nap as you see.' Mr. Fong is a good fellow. Mr. Fong likes to come in and help me very much. It is hobby with him. He takes much interestings in sorting letters.'

Then it was Lisa realized that while she had been walking warily, afraid she had an enemy, Mr. Fong had been walking

warily also. She thought uneasily of her note to Steve, suddenly aware that its chance of ever reaching him was a slim one. How long had Mr. Fong been indulging his interesting hobby? Had he read all Steve's letters to her, as well as her notes to him? With a little shiver she knew it was more than likely, and if he had, then he knew what Steve knew about him, and he must know that she would have told Frank. And again there came to her the acrid and bitter taste of danger.

Only six weeks more, she told herself. Oh, if the time would only hurry up and pass! Preparations for the grand opening ceremony were already beginning. Once that was over, surely Mr. Fong would go and leave them in peace. The talk of the extension to the railway, the new road through the jungle to Mandalay, and all the other beautiful and ambitious projects Frank and his father discussed from time to time when the family was together after the evening rice, no longer worried her. She knew them now for what they were, airy dreams, unlikely to come to anything. Gaudy and brief as the flowering trees, the padauk and the flame-of-the-forest that flourished all about the river bank and the little town.

And as ephemeral.

With September came the gradual cessation of the rains, and the sun came out, and the whole world steamed in an atmosphere of greenhouse moisture. The floods in field and countryside began to abate, the farmers worked knee-deep in water, planting out patiently and by hand, the new crop of young paddy. And as they worked, people talked of one thing only, the coming of the electric light and power, that was to transform the whole countryside. At the family gatherings after the evening rice, Frank and his father were off again on the great possibilities opening before them.

'A cinema!' cried Frank. 'Why not? It would be a good idea. Charlie Chaplin. Greta Garbo. Think of the money it would bring in if we ran a cinema.'

His father nodded gravely, his fine old face lighting up as he listened. He loved a plan. Everybody loved a plan. Only Lisa, it seemed, listened to them, smiling tenderly to herself. She did not pour cold water on their magnificent projects now. At

one time she tried to reason with Frank, to argue with him. Now she knew it was not necessary. They died at birth.

And now about the little towns and villages all over the countryside, preparations began for the Festival of Lights, but this time, instead of the small oil wick floating in the saucer, the rows of little candles stuck dangerously along dunne roofing and wood rail, the nightlights burning inside the paper lanterns that were shaped like stars, and birds, and fish, there were to be new and splendid electric illuminations that would not need to be lit with tapers, but would be turned on with a switch. The village became woven in with a spider's web of wires. The delicate spire of the pagoda had its rings of electric bulbs. This year the festival would surpass all other festivals in the memory of man, in novelty and splendour and brilliance of its lighting.

Bales of goods came from China in packing cases—electric light bulbs and fancy fittings, the contents of each case clearly indented on the outside. They were stacked up in the godowns till someone had time to open them. All about the slopes about the pagoda, basha huts sprang up, and platforms for the *pwes* and marionette shows and the food stalls. There was, most wonderful of all, a roundabout such as had never before been seen in those parts, the horses with looking-glass mosaic on their rumps. Swing chairs also arrived that would whirl people high over the heads of the crowds. People already gathered around to inspect these marvels. Three weeks before the festival, people were already camping out on the pagoda slopes.

There was, however, one hitch. No one knew how to set the roundabout up, or get it working. It had never struck Frank or his father that these things would arrive in pieces, needing to be erected. Even Frank was at a loss. His engineering course had taught him many things, but not how to put roundabouts together.

'They must send a man from Rangoon to see to it,' said Frank. It would be an added expense, but with all the excitement and the coming and going, a mad recklessness seized everyone, and they became filled with immense energy and complete disregard for expense.

'What does it matter,' said Frank's father. 'Soon much money will be coming in now.'

As befitted men about to become rich beyond the dreams of avarice, both Frank and his father bought new clothes. Instead of the customary checked cotton *loungyis* they usually worked in, they now wore their good silk *putsoes* every day. The entire countryside ceased work and put on the gala air of holiday. The school was closed now until after the opening. All about the countryside at evening, Burmese music tinkled and clanged, as musicians practised the traditional tunes. In a corner of the veranda Saw Win sat playing softly on his mouth organ. He lent a hand wherever it was required, but whether he joined in the general rejoicings over the Festival, Lisa had no way of knowing.

'This is a very splendid occasion,' Frank told him. 'You are no longer a poor man. You must wear silk.' He ordered his brother a very fine rose coloured *putsoe*, but Saw Win only grinned and went on wearing the old checked cotton.

'Like a coolie!' stormed Frank.

'I change when the lights go up,' said his brother.

Everything was finished, Frank announced. Everything was in order. It remained now only for Frank's father to turn on the main switch and flood the whole countryside with light. The excitement of it all had infected Lisa and Ma May, and they longed for the magic moment when the lights would suddenly flash out, and fill the paper lanterns and outline the little houses.

'But surely,' said Lisa, 'you will already try it, make a rehearsal before the Feast itself?'

Frank shook his head. To do this, he explained, would be very unlucky. The astrologers and soothsayers had already been consulted and had given it out that the lucky day for the new beginning, was the first day of the Festival of Lanterns.

'For that day, you must look very beautiful. You must plait your hair with the pearls again, and you must wear Mr. Fong's ring. It will please him.'

It was on the tip of her tongue to say she had no desire to please Mr. Fong. All she wanted was for him to be gone! Only a few days more, and she need never again look up from her work and see him there, his hands in his sleeves. Watching her. With luck she need never see him again.

Three days before the grand opening when Lisa was busying

herself about her housework, and Frank had gone, Lisa looked up and saw Mr. Fong coming through the coco-nut trees. At first she was half minded to hide, and pretend she also was not at home, but it was too late, for she knew Mr. Fong had seen her. He stood looking up at the veranda, and she leaned on the rail to talk to him and did not ask him to come in. There was so little time left now that surely it did not matter whether Mr. Fong's feelings got hurt or not.

'You will wear my ling for feast, I hope?' he asked, and the sun put a sheen on his butter-coloured face like the polish on a young banana leaf.

'Frank wishes me to wear it,' she said, 'and so I shall do so.'

'All light. You give me now, I get nicely cleaned and polished for you. Nicely, so it shine.'

'It shines already. It needs no polishing,' she said, leaning with her arms on the rail and looking down at him. If only Ma May had been there, but it was a little too early in the morning.

'Better give it to me, I tlink,' said Mr. Fong, and now, under his bland and smiling manner, she sensed a threat.

She said nothing at all, hoping perhaps Mr. Fong would think she had not heard him. Even if I offend him now, he cannot harm us she thought, for the work is finished.

'So,' said Mr. Fong, and now his voice was not quite so bland or agreeable. 'You don't give it me to make clean and beautiful for you.'

'It is beautiful already,' she said, hoping to mollify him. 'It is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.'

Mr. Fong took a step forward. He seemed about to enter the house, and then suddenly he stopped short, his hand on the rail, and forced back on to his face the agreeable smile that had, for a moment, left it. Lisa followed his glance, and saw to her surprise Saw Win standing a little way off, leaning against a palm tree, whittling a piece of stick idly with his long sharp hunting knife. And she knew in that moment that Mr. Fong's face had changed because he saw the boy there, and she knew, too, that Saw Win did not like or trust Mr. Fong any more than she herself did, and that that was why he was there.

'Never mind,' said Mr. Fong. . . . He seemed thoughtful. As

he went off, he tapped his front teeth with the gold pencil he carried in his hand. Saw Win came slowly over to her.

'He went away because he saw you,' said Lisa breathlessly.

Saw Win said nothing at all.

'Why did he come, Saw Win? What does he want with me? Why did he ask me for the ring?'

Saw Win held out a hand.

'Give to me,' he said slowly.

She went into the sleeping-room. She took the little case from the corner cupboard where she kept her valuables. She touched the spring, and the lid lifted and showed the stone on the bed of velvet, blue as a drop of the Mediterranean with the sun on it, translucent and beautiful.

'Perhaps he is sorry he gave it you,' said Saw Win slowly. 'Perhaps he thought giving it you would make you his friend, but now he knows it has not made you his friend. And he is sorry because of the money. We will hide it. We will not leave it in house, but put it in garden. I think that sometime when house empty, Mr. Fong will come back to look for it.'

In the end, he found a better place than a hole in the garden. In the centre of the bamboo clump where the children played there was a collection of twigs and loose earth and dead leaves. Saw Win scraped them aside, and put the ring in its square case inside there, and covered the place again with sand and with leaves and pieces of dead bamboo, so that there was nothing to show that anyone had been there at all. Then he got a broom and brushed the ground so that there were no traces left of their foot-prints.

When he had finished, they saw Ma May coming through the trees towards the house, and Lisa hurried off to meet her and tell her what had happened. The two girls returned arm in arm, to find Saw Win had disappeared as quietly as he came.

THIRTEEN

ALL night long the air was filled with the moan and wail of bullock cart wheels, as people streamed in from the surrounding villages for the festival. A complete village had sprung up now on the pagoda slopes, with fruit stalls, and sweetmeat stalls, toy stalls with their *papier maché* tigers and golden owls, their prancing wooden horses, and Japanese celluloid dolls with crafty eyes.

There came, too, strange monstrosities to be shown in darkened booths for a small sum. Calves with two heads, and monstrous outlandish animals, results of unnatural crossings, and there, too, was the young man Lisa had seen in the bazaar with his limbless father, wizened and bearded, in his basket, hoping to turn an honest penny exhibiting the old man to the curious.

Bullock carts brought in vegetables from the jungle. Lush green cabbages from Chinamen's gardens, small oranges and limes, scarlet chillies and blue brinjal all herded together, the vendors filling the air with their strident cries.

Over smoking fires old women squatted, cooking bananas coated in sugar and rice flour, and dropped into scalding fat. Cooking mohinga and black plum pickle, and sticky rice packed into sticks of bamboo, and all the air was filled with the atmosphere of holiday, and the spicy cooking smells, and dust and diligent flies.

In front of the stage where the marionettes would be shown after dark, bullock-carts were drawn up like motor cars in an outdoor cinema, families camping in them, and under them, the patient bullocks tethered behind, adding their quota to the general smell. And over every stall there hung a paper lantern, or floated a paper star, or a fish, cunningly fashioned from bamboo and coloured paper, in whose insides lurked the electric bulb that would be lit when Frank's father turned the switch and the installation began working. Mr. Fong had given everybody a present of electric bulbs free, and he had also provided from China the myriad fairy lamps, orange and scarlet and blue with which the palm trees and the pepil trees, and the fronts of the

stalls, and the *zayats* where the pilgrims camped, were all festooned for the feast.

Mr. Fong came very early to the pagoda slopes the day before the grand opening. He went round the stalls in the cool of the early morning. He appeared to be in great spirits, and no wonder, for he was greeted on every side as a public benefactor. For some reason Frank's family, who had supplied all the money for the undertaking, took a second place to the great Mr. Fong.

He made lavish purchases, buying toys, silk and cotton *loungies* and black and gold lacquer boxes such as they make in Pagan. And orange and black mottled tigers he bought, and little gold lucky owls, and these he took back to his house in a rickshaw and had his servants pack them all into several large packing cases which he had ready there.

Late that night he himself was up and busy, moving about his house, his shadow painted very large on the wooden walls by the light of the hurricane lamp he carried around. Whilst from the ceiling of his house, like drops of pure water, hung the electric bulbs, newly fitted, that tomorrow were to bring into life, and at the touch of a switch, flood all the countryside with brilliance, and begin to pay Frank's family at least forty per cent on their investment. Net.

All that last day before the beginning of the Festival, Lisa and Ma May had been busy, like everyone else, hanging the elaborate paper lanterns that Frank had brought them, all about the house and the veranda and festooning them amongst the palm trees in the compound, until the place looked like a transformation scene in a pantomime.

'How beautiful it will be when the lights come on,' said Lisa, surveying her handiwork, excited as a child about it all. It seemed to her that at last the time had come that she had dreamed of and longed for, when Mr. Fong's work would be finished and he would go, and what was becoming a secret nightmare to her would come to an end.

Saw Win appeared carrying a large packing case on his shoulder. His strength always amazed Lisa. He could lift, alone, loads that two or three men usually strained and panted over. He said nothing at all, and squatted down and began to

unpack his box, and the two girls stood watching him. Out of it came little earthenware saucers, shaped like leaves, and little candles to stick in them, and floats to be set in oil in the old-fashioned manner. And these he placed all along the edge of the veranda and at the sides of the house.

Frank laughed when he saw what his brother had done.

'Old Saw ! He is a good fellow. That is the old-fashioned manner in which we always kept the Festival of Lights as children and I suppose he does not care for these new ways.' He looked at the hanging electric bulbs and the fairy lamps festooning the trees by kindness of Mr. Fong, and just for a moment he seemed himself half regretful. 'Maybe old ways for festivals are best. . . .' he said.

The great day came, with everyone up very early and the sound of music, and thumb drums and the tinkle of the saing-wains already filling the air. It was almost impossible to move through the streets for the crowds there, and now families were camping not only on the pagoda slopes, but on the roadside, and all about the jungle, where thin threads of smoke from a hundred fires went up against the still blue of the sky.

The fun began at sunset with the lighting of the lamps. Lisa and Ma May had arranged to go along there together at four in the afternoon, so Lisa was surprised when, as early as two o'clock, Saw Win came to fetch her. She had not put on her party attire, so he had to wait, squatting on the veranda, playing softly on his mouth organ. She had to change into the beautiful brocade *loungyi* Frank had bought her for the occasion, and plait the pearls into her hair as he had asked her to do.

'I had not thought of going so early,' she said to Saw Win. 'I have still things to do in the house.'

He said in his stolid way, 'Better come,' and went on waiting.

They fetched Ma May on the way, and the two girls went laughing and pushing along through the tightly packed streets, glad now to be out and in the midst of all the excitement. It was gay as the Wakes, the roundabout doing a roaring trade, with long queues waiting for rides on the gaudy horses. The man who had come from Rangoon at great expense, had soon got the machinery going, and the strident music rang out its old-fashioned tunes 'Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do' mixing

with the whanging of the thumb drums and the tinkling of the saing-wain. On the open air stages the actors and actresses were preparing for the evening performance, whitening their faces with thanaka, and decking their hair. The fortune tellers and scribes were doing a brisk trade in the *zayats*.

Frank would return to the house from the work, for tea. He liked a cup of tea in the afternoon, European fashion, and he kept up the custom, which gave him great face in the town. So at four o'clock, Lisa and Ma May made their way back to the house to join him, meaning to return later all together for the grand opening and lighting up.

'I also become very English,' said Saw Win. 'I like some tea, too.' He accompanied them, going ahead, and clearing a passage for them with his broad shoulders through the crowds. When they got to the coco-nut grove, Lisa ran on ahead, afraid Frank might have got back before them, and missed her. They heard her horrified cry and when they came up with her, saw her standing, her hands to her head.

The house had been ransacked during their absence. The stuffing had been pulled out of the cushions, drawers emptied, books pulled from the shelves and thrown about the floor. The bowl Lisa had painted white and kept full of flowers, lay broken, its blossoms scattered. The long mirror Frank had had sent at such expense from Rangoon for her, was wantonly shattered, as though a brick had been heaved through the middle of it. It was as if someone wild with rage had thrown things around in madness because he could not find what he looked for.

Ma May and Lisa looked at one another.

'He came for the ring,' Lisa said, and she went to the clump of bamboos where Saw Win had hidden the case under twigs and dead leaves. It was still there. She stood up, the box in her hand, and heard Saw Win say, close beside her :

'I do not think it was only the ring he came for !'

Lisa sat down on the bottom step of the veranda, feeling suddenly sick. The fun and the laughter went out of the day, and something sinister and unpleasant was suddenly there, engulfing them. As if the shadow of Mr. Fong had fallen, more than life-size, over the garden, thrown there by the first rays of the setting sun.

A bicycle bell tinkled, and Lisa looked up and saw Frank. He came pedalling down the dusty road on his English bicycle, his handsome silk *putsoe* tucked up for greater speed, and from the way he rode, and the anxious drawn expression on his gentle face, she thought some tidings of what had happened must already have reached him, and he had hurried home, anxious about her.

'It's all right. . . .' she said unsteadily. 'No one has been harmed—only the house.'

Then she stopped, aware that it was not the burglary that was worrying Frank. It seemed he hardly noticed the torn cushions, and broken glass and china all about him. He had something else on his mind.

'Mr. Fong,' he said hurriedly, 'Where is Mr. Fong?'

'We have not seen him though I think he has been here,' said his brother dryly. The atmosphere of foreboding that was all about them seemed to thicken, so that Lisa knew what the next move would be, even before Frank spoke again, his voice bewildered and unsteady.

'Mr. Fong cannot be found.'

'You mean—he is gone?' said Lisa and in spite of all that it probably entailed, she felt a swift surge of relief. If Saw Win hadn't come for me when he did. If I had been alone in the house this afternoon, she thought, what then? Suddenly she found herself out of breath, as if she had been running, and she tried hard not to listen to those voices in her head that told her this wasn't the end, there was more to come. She must put such ideas away, for very fear that by thinking of them she might bring them to pass. It couldn't be, she told herself firmly, Mr. Fong had no doubt disappeared for good reasons of his own—but the lights must surely come on when the master switch was turned, the power house must start working. Otherwise where would they be? All the money gone and nothing to show for it. Like the affair of the rice mill. Like the business of the cement works.

'What has happened here?' asked Frank, noticing the wreckage for the first time.

'A tiger came. But he did no harm,' said Saw Win. 'Come. Some tea to cheer us all.'

They sat bemused amongst the wreckage, drinking tea, wondering what could have happened to Mr. Fong. Only an accident, Frank said, could have kept him away on this, of all days. As usual, no thought of evil or double dealing entered Frank's gentle mind. He was anxious about Mr. Fong, certain he had suffered some stroke of ill fortune.

'Maybe we shall find him on the Pagoda slopes,' he said at length.

'Maybe,' said Saw Win, dryly. 'Now you had best return there, but I will stay here and clear up.'

'But you will miss all the fun!' said Ma May.

'You can tell me about it,' he said.

Frank and the two girls made their way back to the Pagoda slopes, but now, for Lisa, all the gaiety had gone out of the day, and all she wished was that the evening could be quickly over.

On the edge of the crowd there was a small wizened old woman who kept a stall that sold oil dips and nightlights to put inside lanterns in the old-fashioned way, and little earthenware saucers, shaped like stars and like leaves to place oil wicks in. She had done a great trade in the old-fashioned days at the Festival, but this year her trade had been ruined. Nobody bought candles any longer, since all their houses and stalls were to be lit by the free electric bulbs that had been supplied by Mr. Fong from China.

The old woman squatted sourly in her stall, angrily smoking a large green cheroot, for she was not enjoying the Festival and it looked as though a lean year stretched ahead of her after she had carted all her unsold wares home again.

She listened to the opening proceedings from afar. She saw Frank's father mount the special platform that had been prepared for him and make a little speech in his thin old voice that did not carry, in spite of the microphone Mr. Fong had erected for them. Then one of the pagoda trustees made a long speech in which he praised Frank's father and family for their foresight and goodness in bringing to this small township the great boon of electricity that would so soon link them up with many other advantages of modern civilization. He took some time painting a word picture of all the things electricity would do for them. Then

Frank's father, gorgeous in an orange *putsoe* shot with blue, stepped forward and turned on the switch.

Nothing happened. Nothing happened at all. The packed crowds waited breathless, thinking no doubt this delay was a part of the show. Frank's father tried again. He turned the switch once more. 'Then he flipped it petulantly up and down. The glass bulbs and the fairy lamps remained hanging there lifeless as before in the gathering twilight, and the only light was from the oil flares on the stalls and the fires from the old women's cookings.

For a startled moment the breathless silence held. Nothing lit up save the face of the old woman on the stall that sold little candles. Suddenly her shrill voice broke the silence, shouting a ribald remark. People began to laugh. They laughed, rocking themselves backwards and forwards, slapping one another on the back in an ecstasy of humour. The ribald remarks increased, and were bandied back and forth, and grew louder.

Frank and his father, and the Pagoda Trustees on the platform with them, laughed also, but ruefully. There was nothing else they could do. Lisa sat beside Ma May, her hands tightly clasped in her lap, and wondered how it was that she had known all along this was what would happen, known it with such certainty that she was not surprised at all, only in a way relieved that it was over, and they now knew the worst.

The Pagoda Trustee got up once more and made another speech. He said that owing to a technical hitch at the transmitter the grand switching on of the electricity that was going to bring them all the boons and blessings already mentioned, would have to be postponed for a time until everything had been made right. In the course of his speech he was often interrupted this time, by ribald remarks and good-humoured bursts of laughter.

Frank and his father hurried off to the power house to see what could be done. It could be, Frank told Lisa, there was something that no one save Mr. Fong thoroughly understood, something Mr. Fong had omitted to explain to them when he handed the works over, so how unfortunate that Mr. Fong should be absent when he was so badly needed. Once they got in touch with him again, everything would be all right.

Lisa and Ma May went home through the darkened town, to find the house set straight and tidied up, as much as might be, and a blaze of lights from the little old-fashioned candles and oil dips that Saw Win had placed there earlier in the day. Seated on the veranda waiting for them, the evening meal ready, was Saw Win himself. Softly playing 'Home Sweet Home' on his mouth organ.

Presently here and there about the town other lights sprang up, burning in little saucers. Things began to look up for the woman with the candle stall. It looked like turning into one of the best festivals she had ever had. And the man who manipulated the marionettes on the open air stage, hastily re-dressed one of them so that he looked like a Chinaman who appeared to be running over hill and dale chased by people, and a stork, and a frog—who never caught him. And that was the most popular turn of the evening.

Where was Mr. Fong?

Until well after midnight Frank and his father working frenziedly down at the power house, clung to the thought that he had had an accident, that he had been delayed somewhere—that he would at any minute turn up. Again and again Frank, his beautiful silk *putsoe* specially bought at great expense for the opening ceremony, went to the doorway and looked hopefully down the long road. But all he saw was the lights springing up here and there about the town, as people lit their little candles in the old-fashioned way, and the glare in the sky from the fair on the Pagoda slopes, and he heard from afar off the raucous music of the roundabout playing 'Daisy Daisy'.

All about the countryside men went on bicycles, looking for Mr. Fong. Runners went down the jungle tracks to see if by any evil chance his car had got stuck there. Frank and his father did not abandon hope till one of the messengers returned, foot-sore and weary, with news at last.

Not good news. Long before sunrise, the Chinaman's car had been seen, heavily laden with parcels and packages and stacked with furniture, crossing the frontier into China. The green silk blinds had been drawn down over the windows of the car, so that it was not possible to see who was inside.

‘Anyway,’ Ma May said, making the best of a bad business, ‘he did not get the ring.’ But Lisa hated the thing and wished that he had, feeling she could never look at it again, without that sense of foreboding and disaster. And she thought, with a sick shiver, that the ring wasn’t all Mr. Fong had planned to carry off with him over the frontier when he joined his car that afternoon. If Saw Win hadn’t come and fetched her away and she had been alone in the house that afternoon she would probably not be sitting there now.

Dawn was breaking primrose and saffron and rose over an opal river, when Frank at length came home. Lisa had not been to sleep. She had spent the night leaning her arms on the veranda rail, waiting for Frank, watching the river. Aware, in spite of all the shipwreck and disaster that surrounded her, that a weight had been lifted off her, and she was no longer frightened of being left in the house alone.

Frank stood and faced her, swaying a little. He was green with weariness, his beautiful clothes torn and grease-stained from his battles with the machinery. She put her arms about him and drew his head against her, and said tenderly what she had always felt for him :

‘My little child. Never mind.’

She could feel his shoulders shaking in his anguish.

‘You were right, Lisa. Always you are right. We have been sold a pup up the garden path, and that is how it is. . . .’

‘It is because you are too good and believing, and cannot see the evil in people’s hearts.’

‘Machinery for which we paid much money, is not there. We have had no instructions as to filling the tanks, believing Mr. Fong would be present to attend to this. Now the money is all gone. Many lakhs he had from my father and now we have nothing left. An installation that will not work.’

‘And a rice mill that does not go. And cement works that are out of order,’ thought Lisa and her arms tightened about him pitifully.

‘All these people who have come from Rangoon, the actors, the men for the roundabouts and swinging chairs, all waiting now to be paid, and we cannot pay for them without money !’

'Forget it for a little while, and sleep,' she begged him. But Frank could not sleep.

'I promised you so much. Riches and beautiful things, and many jewels, and now—nothing. I am a poor man.'

'You gave me beautiful things,' she consoled him. 'Clothes and travelling, and fun, when I was poor and had nothing. Now it is my turn to help, for listen, my dear, we are not so very poor. Do not forget my school. Now that we have raised our fees do you know what the school is paying every month? Five hundred rupees! With all your father's houses and your father's land we can plant rice and vegetables, we can all of us live very comfortably. We will not sell the rice mill Mr. Fong wished to buy, to him, or to any friends of his. Saw Win believes he can work it, and mill the rice we grow ourselves. We will go back to the old ways. Which are the best, I think, for us. I think it will be fun.'

He repeated after her, incredulous, 'You think it will be fun! When I had promised you so many splendid things, and now it must be all hard work!'

'I like work.'

'I had hoped to be a big man, to do many things for you, and now it has to be you who do things for me. This school of yours that I have laughed about, makes five hundred rupees a month for us, and I have nothing.'

She said softly, 'Oh yes, you have.' She fetched the little leather case from its hiding place, and pressed the spring. There lay the jewel, sparkling, catching the thin light of dawn. 'This you still have. How hard Mr. Fong has tried to get it back. But thanks to your brother Saw Win he could not find it. First Mr. Fong came to me and asked me to give it him so that he could clean it, and when I would not do this, he came to try and find it and take it away.'

She shivered, remembering what else Mr. Fong had hoped to take away, but she did not tell him.

'You can sell this ring for five or six thousand rupees. That will pay for the *pwe*, the feast and the roundabouts from Rangoon. Then there are all those packing cases full of electric light bulbs and fittings.'

Frank looked at her, his face drawn with despair.

'There is nothing. Tonight we have looked in them. They are full of bricks and rubbish, my darling. And the machinery, also, that he has provided, is mostly rubbish, and all the money we paid for it has gone. If only I had listened to you, and to Mr. Fairfield's warnings.'

'Never mind. We still have the ring,' she comforted him. 'I think we shall be quite all right.'

'You can be happy—in spite of all this?'

'I am very happy,' she said. 'Because Mr. Fong has gone and we shall never see him again. Since the music and the roundabouts are all here, let us enjoy them and the Feast and forget all the unhappiness and disappointment. And now, my little child, go to sleep for, look, the sun is rising.'

So for the remaining days of the Festival of Lights, the music blared bravely, the dancers posed and postured and sang their nasal songs, the golden bells on the Pagoda tinkled in the breeze, mingling with the strains of 'Daisy, Daisy' from the roundabout. The marionette show enjoyed an immense popularity, especially the scene of the flying Chinaman which with constant repetition became more and more bawdy. A soothsayer from the Monastery did a great trade drawing horoscopes and telling fortunes, and selling calendars that set forth the propitious days in the coming year, for business, love, and travel. And amongst all these excitements, the people forgot their disappointment over the many benefits of modern civilization that could now not be theirs.

Frank bought one of the calendars, rather shamefacedly, and hung it up in the house. 'Perhaps none of our troubles would have come to us if we had paid more attention to these matters,' he said gloomily. 'Maybe the old ways are best.' For some days his spirits were at a very low ebb and Lisa had a lot of comforting to do. 'How can you like me when I have been so foolish?' he cried a dozen times.

'You are gentle and kind,' she said. 'And you cannot see that all others are not so. I do not think you, or your father, or any of your family are business people, and so those who are must always get the better of you. Only Saw Win, I think, no one will get the better of. That is a clever boy.'

Frank looked at her, surprised.

'You think him clever? But he has no education. And he is very ugly.'

'Ugliness can be beautiful. And I do not think cleverness depends on an expensive education. It is something in the heart. The rest of you are artists, dreamers of dreams, my dear one. Makers of beautiful things. Silks and golden pagodas, and carved owls and tigers. And good songs.'

It cheered Frank up a lot to be told he was an artist.

'But I have good training as engineer,' he told her. She kissed the top of his head gently and kindly.

'I know,' she said. 'I know!'

'And Saw Win has no training at all!'

'I know,' she said. 'All the same, let us always consult him. He has the business head.'

The festival was over, the crowds dispersed—the bullock carts creaked and groaned away into silence, the dust clouds subsided over the paddy fields. On the Pagoda slopes the bamboo bashas and huts had been taken down, the roundabout man had packed up his horses and returned to Rangoon. The candles had all burned themselves out, and the paper lanterns had been lit for the last time, and carried down to the river bank, and set on the tide to be carried out to sea.

Now there remained only the horrible settling up.

A family council to appraise assets was held in Frank's father's house, and this time Saw Win and Lisa were both included, and their suggestions listened to.

'My wife has very good head for business,' Frank explained.

Since Mr. Fong had kept no accounts whatever everything was in confusion. It was clear that the machinery he had installed was cheap and of inferior quality, and much of it was not new. Several important parts Mr. Fong had indented for and been paid for, were not there at all, and already the weight of the boilers he had put in had caused one end of the engine house to subside.

Lisa sat silent, listening to the recital of all these disasters without comment. When they came to an end, it was she who put the other, and brighter side of the picture. There was the new rice crop coming in. The school made enough money to keep

the family going, and would shortly make even more, for Ma May would have things for sale from the sewing classes. There was still half a godown full of last year's rice on hand. No need to starve in so fertile a land. There was Mr. Fong's beautiful and expensive ring.

They listened to her, nodding, and little by little they cheered up, and began to snatch crumbs of comfort from the dreary outlook themselves.

'After all, there is some good news,' said Frank, his gentle face lighting. 'We can now get the good wooden bungalow on the hill that I have always wanted, and Lisa can have her school there with plenty of room. With money coming in, she can have servants there. A sweeper. . . . A cook and boy. . . . And we can build. . . .'

He was off again on one of his airy flights of fancy, but she brought him to earth.

'To start with we shall go on exactly as before. With no building, and no more servants,' she said. 'Nothing will be spent till the debts are paid.'

Both Frank and his father looked disappointed. They loved plans.

She stood on the veranda of the big wooden bungalow on the hill, looking down towards the river. This was a proper house, built in other days for the European Commissioner. It had high rooms, and large bathrooms, and a wide veranda running all round it, airy and cool, and ideal for class rooms. She wandered through the big rooms, arranging them in her mind. The furniture from the little mat house in the palm grove would look lost and forlorn in here, but meantime she refused to listen to Frank's splendid schemes for refurnishing. Once the smell and the haunting of Mr. Fong had been aired from the place, she knew she would like it. Indeed he had left little behind him, save a queer acrid smell in one of the bedrooms Frank told her came from an opium pipe.

And she thought, standing there alone in the empty house, how truly the Herr Doctor had spoken long ago when he told her it was often the narrow and uninteresting lane that led to fortune and fame and the high road. For when he married her, Frank

had had no thought of gain to himself from it. From the kindness and generosity of his heart he had taken her with nothing. And now it was her school, and her work that was to be the saving of all of them. With the space she now had, she could take more pupils, she could raise the fees still further. She could support the entire family until some plan could be made about the power house, either to get it working or else to dismantle it, and sell what could be sold, before the whole thing fell into the river.

Frank came up in the evening and helped with the planning.

'Now that I have meantime no job and no office to go to, I can help with school, why not? I can teach English and P.T. and to the older children, business methods and arithmetic.'

'Why not?' said Lisa, and again she nearly loved him for his boyishness and simplicity and the fact that he believed wishing to do something instantly made him capable of it.

But she knew she would have to keep a firm hand on him and restrain his flights of fancy and his ambitious plans. And that wasn't going to be easy without hurting him.

'The first thing I must do is very plain,' he said. 'I must take this ring and go down to Rangoon. It is indeed a very valuable ring, as you say, and a good thing Mr. Fong did not get it back. I shall take it to Rich Uncle and he will help me to sell it. He will know where I should go to get the best price.'

'Why go to Rangoon?' said Lisa doubtfully. 'We can sell it to advantage here to some Indian merchant or rich business man. There will be expenses if you go down to Rangoon. Air passages cost a lot of money and then in a town one is always spending.'

She knew what it was like with Frank in a town.

'In Rangoon people have more money. I can get six, even perhaps seven thousand rupees there for a stone like this one. We can then perhaps buy a small car, second-hand, which would be useful for driving about countryside now jeep has been sold. And I would not go by expensive air. I will go by train.'

'One day perhaps we will have a car again, but not now. All money we get must pay off debts,' she told him firmly. 'And I don't want you to go by train. There are too many bandits about. Every day we hear of hold-ups and shootings, and robbing.'

‘But, my darling, they would not rob me? Everyone knows my family in this district. It is only Indians and foreigners that these things happen to.’ These are my own people, and whether or not they are bandits, they would not harm me. All right, if you think best. Meantime no car, but I must go to Rangoon.’ He was suddenly depressed again. He had seen himself seated at the wheel of a small car, painted some brilliant colour, driving about the countryside, raising important clouds of red laterite dust. Because of that, she gave in to him about Rangoon. Maybe he was right. Maybe Rich Uncle would get him a better price. After all, she could not cross him all the time, or he would loose heart. Swift depression still descended on him far too easily.

‘I had hoped to do so much for you. And look at it!’

She pressed her cheek against his sleeve. ‘It is my turn to do something for you now.’

‘But for your school we would indeed be lodged in a gum tree!’

‘Never mind. Let us be thankful I can do it. All the same,’ she added uneasily, ‘I would rather you did not travel down to Rangoon.’

‘Nonsense, my darling. The trains get better and better now all the time, and as I tell you, I have nothing to fear. This is my own country. You could write a letter to this chap Fairfield. Tell him I am coming and would like to see him, why not? I would like to tell him how foolish I was not to listen to what he told us about this Fong. Fairfield might even know of some way in which it would be possible to get hold of him and get some money back. A lawsuit, perhaps.’

‘Oh no,’ she said shocked. ‘Anything but that! I will write a letter to him and you can take it with you and deliver it to him yourself. That is better than posting. With our post office here one never knows.’

‘Now Mr. Fong is not there to help with sorting, it will be all right you’ll find,’ Frank said. ‘Write and post tonight, I think. Then Fairfield will get it before I come and can plan to see me. I shall take Thursday’s train.’

His trip began to take on the air of a magnificent crusade he was carrying out for her sake, and he was once again so enjoying

the planning and arranging of it, that she had no heart to discourage him. She wrote a note to Steve, telling him Frank was coming down to Rangoon to sell a ring with which they hoped to pay their debts, and begging him to do anything he could to help.

'You were right about the Chinaman. Frank will explain everything to you,' she wrote. 'The electric illumination that was to make us all rich is unfortunately no good, moreover already thieves are picking the machinery to pieces before we can sell it. Yesterday I went to look and I see many brass nuts are gone, and tools already missing. Please send Frank back as soon as it is possible for he should look after all this. And please, I do not wish him to spend any money in Rangoon buying fine presents.'

She did not mention the missing brass nuts and tools to Frank, not wanting to bother him and spoil for him the fun of the coming journey, but she decided to ask Saw Win to have a watch set on the power house till Frank got back. Maybe, she thought, the trip to Rangoon would be a good thing for him, a little change and holiday after the bitter disappointment of the past days.

She took the letter down to the post office herself in the cool of the evening. It was wonderful to be able to pass the joss house without any fear of who might be watching her from the shadows there. The fact that she would never again see Mr. Fong in his complicated trouserings, outlined in the circular doorway, made her feel light hearted in spite of herself.

The post office was empty, the space behind the grating piled up as usual with mail bags, waiting to be sorted and delivered or sent on when a train was available and the Postmaster felt inclined. Standing there, with her letter in her hand, Lisa again had the feeling it would have been far wiser to let Frank deliver it to Steve in person, but having come so far, she might as well post it. So she slipped it into the box through the barrage of spiders' webs. Frank wanted it that way.

As she turned to go, she thought suddenly it would be a good idea to see the Postmaster to tell him about the move of her school from the house in the palm grove, to the big bungalow on the hill. She wanted to get him to post up a notice in Burmese in the post office window, informing other parents.

The Postmaster was sitting on his veranda drinking something pink out of a bottle. He had a visitor. They had been having an earnest conversation which stopped dead as Lisa appeared. For one moment, seeing that sleek black head, butter-coloured complexion, and dapper tussore suiting, Lisa felt faint, for she thought it was Mr. Fong. Then she saw this man was a stranger, heavily marked with smallpox, and that he had only one eye. He looked at her without any interest whatever, and went on with his occupation, which was cleaning his nails with his penknife.

The Postmaster stood up and offered Lisa a chair, but she said hurriedly that she could not stay. She had only come to tell him that from next Monday school would be held in the big bungalow on the hill. The Postmaster received the news impassively, and before Lisa had time to inform him he must in future pay something towards the cost of pencils, books, etc., he pointed out that, as it was farther for his children to walk, they would wear out more shoes. Therefore in his opinion she ought to pay him a small sum towards this burden, for he was a poor man.

Lisa was getting very tired of the Postmaster.

'I shall pay you nothing,' she said shortly. 'I already take your children free. If you prefer to send them somewhere else please do. I have a great number of children now waiting to come as soon as I can give them places. Children whose parents are willing to pay the proper fees.'

She was far too well established now, she told herself, for the Postmaster to be able to harm her. She had the Venerable from the Monastery on her side, and the Postmaster knew it. He said nothing for a moment. Then he looked at her with narrowed eyes and said, 'Hearty congratulations on success of electrical venture,' and both he and the Chinaman began to laugh. 'This is Mr. Hok Yong,' said the Postmaster, a little late in the day. 'He wishes to buy up old rice mill.'

Lisa said, 'The rice mill is now not for sale. We intend to repair and work it ourselves.' As she said it her eyes fell on something that shone and glittered in the afternoon sun on one of the window-ledges. It was a little heap of new brass nuts. Beside it lay one of the long spanners that Mr. Fong had had hung up on nails in the engine room down at the works. So that was who

had been down there helping himself. Lisa opened her mouth to say something, and then thought better of it, and turned and went away.

After she had gone, the Postmaster shrugged his shoulders several times, and spread his two hands sideways in a gesture of hopelessness.

'Very proud and troublesome,' he said. 'Perhaps she has put in another letter that will tell us something.'

He came back carrying Lisa's letter to Steve in his hand. He held it out to Mr. Hok Yong between his thumb and first finger.

'You like?' he said.

The Chinaman finished off a nail and took the letter and slit it open with his penknife. He read it thoughtfully, nodding his head as he did so. Then he laughed again, and looked at the Postmaster, and winked.

Frank left for Rangoon on the Tuesday train, which did not leave till Thursday owing to one thing and another. He left in the highest spirits, wearing his best silk *putsoe*, travelling Superior Class. He took with him an aluminium food carrier in which Lisa had packed him curry and rice, and little sweet pancakes he was fond of, for the journey. He had also a small attaché case and his bedding rolls with its good English rug.

His gentle face was lit with excitement and enthusiasm at the prospect of the jaunt to town. He looked, thought Lisa, like a little boy going on a holiday to the sea. The amount of money he expected to get for the ring had been mounting day by day, until in his guileless mind it had grown to a sum that would see them out of all their troubles, and provide them, into the bargain, with the little motor car he had so set his heart on. It was a wonderful stone. Of the first water. Who could tell?

To the last Lisa tried to persuade him not to go. Surely it would be better to take what they could get for the ring locally, and not spend money travelling. Moreover, she had the deepest forebodings as to what Frank would do when he got away alone amongst shops again. With money in his pocket.

Nobody took her part except Saw Win. The rest of the family were filled with the same wild enthusiasm as Frank. For such a stone, they said, a millionaire might give sixty thousand rupees. Each time they looked at it, it appeared more valuable.

‘Don’t worry, my darling,’ said Frank. ‘I will spend no money, and I will return without failure by next week’s train. We will pay our debts and have a beautiful life, get the mill working, maybe even start making cement again. Saw Win can take charge of all that. There will be money, also, coming from sale of machinery and I will help you with the school.’

It was always to be a comfort to her that he went off so happy and full of plans. She stood with her hand over his as he leaned from the window of the carriage (Superior Class). With a great creaking and groaning the train began to pull out of the station in a series of small jerks.

‘Good-bye. . . good-bye. . .’ cried Frank. He leaned out and gently touched her cheek. Till the train went round the bend and into the jungle, she could see him leaning out of the window, waving enthusiastically.

She never saw him again.

FOURTEEN

The train jolted and rattled through the fast drying-up paddy fields, where the young rice already sprouted its tender carpet of green. Golden sunset flooded all the land like limelight. Flocks of little parrots were already settling themselves with much screeching and bickering, in the bamboo clumps for the night. In the groves of jungle teak little villages were huddled together near the railway line, as though for company's sake, and now, as twilight fell, here and there little lights began to prick out amongst the trees, and the distant hills turned from blue to purple, and then melted into the night and became a part of it.

And then the train left the patches of cultivated and inhabited land behind, and ran out over the endless flatness of uncultivated paddy land, fast going back to jungle itself, because the peasants had all run away into the nearest towns, too frightened to remain and cultivate it. Past Shwebo and Thazi it rattled and bumped along, mile after dusty mile, and the passengers rearranged themselves and their baggage and prepared to settle down for the night, and snatch what sleep they could.

Frank was in clover for he had half a seat to himself. He took off his good silk *putsoe* and pulled his checked cotton sleeping *loungeyi* out of his case, ate some of the food that Lisa had cooked for him, and rinsed his mouth well, spitting out of the window. It was dark now. Ahead of them on the line he could see a little cluster of lights that was the township of Pynmina. In other days it had been a flourishing town set amongst well cultivated rice fields, but since the war it was a place to be shunned and hastened through as fast as possible, for it was well known that a band of dacoits worked that district, and had their camp in the hills. Remembering this, Frank took the little case that had the ring in it, down from the rack, and put it under his head, using it as a pillow.

Then, reasonably comfortable, he composed himself to sleep.

Some way out of the township the line ran through what had once been a flourishing pineapple garden, now deserted and over-

grown, a tangle of waist-high grass and festooning creepers. Here the train was ambushed by men with sten guns and rifles. The driver tried to goad his antique engine to increased speed, in the hope of running through them.

They shot him dead.

The shots aroused Frank, who looked out of the window, but he was not perturbed. He felt certain that when he spoke to these men and told them who he was, they would leave him alone, for the Rich Uncle, as well as Frank's father, was a very well known person. No doubt another engine driver would be found, and they would go on their way, a little late, perhaps, but then trains were usually late nowadays. It was one of the hazards of travel. Maybe one or two people on the train would lose their money, but though that was just too bad, Frank was not greatly disturbed. He himself had no money beyond a few rupees to which they were welcome. He was prepared to hand that over with a smile, like someone contributing to a flag day. Beyond that he was certain he stood in no danger. These were his own people, Burmese boys like himself. He leaned from the window, and with rising spirits recognized one of them. Maung Tin had been with him for a time in the Rangoon University. They had had lots of fun together. A good chap ! thought Frank.

So he leaned from the window confidently, and the light from the torches the dacoits carried lit his gentle face as they came down the train towards him, and showed up the disabled telegraph wires that ran along the side of the railway track, looking like a long stave of music without any notes.

The dacoits did not appear to be doing much robbing. They just peered through the windows at the frightened people huddled inside, and then passed on, and this only increased Frank's confidence, and he called out of the darkness.

'Hi, Maung Tin !'

Somebody said, 'He's here.' They came to the door of his carriage and wrenched it open and pulled him on to the line. Frank still tried to convince himself that their roughness was simply a form of friendly welcome done in kindly fashion, but of a sudden his mouth was dry and his knees felt unreliable.

'Maung Tin. . . . Maung Tin. . . . Do you not remember

me. . . . Frank who was with you at the University down in Rangoon. . . .’ He held out his hand, but the man in the shadows did not take it.

‘I remember you,’ he said, and he laughed.

‘Tell me what it is you want. If it is money I will give you what I have, but it is not much. Of late we have had some few pieces of bad luck.’

His voice faded. He looked at the young man he had once known, and knew, with a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach, that he did not know him any longer.

‘Come on. . . .The ring. Hand it over,’ said the man in the shadows, roughly.

So that was it. Frank’s hands shook. His face was putty-coloured in the light of the smoking torches, but he said firmly, ‘No. I cannot give you the ring, for it is not mine, it belongs to my wife!’ How right Lisa had been. How right Lisa always was, if only he had had the good sense to listen to her. He gulped and went on breathlessly, ‘The money we hope to get for this ring is all we have left. We have already been robbed by a Chinaman. Please understand me.’

They closed in on him, hustling him with their elbows, jolting him with their rifle butts. ‘Hand it over. Sharp!’

And now he noticed that though they all wore the Burmese dress only the man he had once known was a true Burmese. The others were half-caste Chinamen, outcasts from the north and from over the frontier and the black rage that burned in his heart gave him courage he did not usually have.

‘It is my wife’s ring,’ he repeated. ‘I will not give it to you.’ And he looked at the man he had once been friends with and said bitterly, ‘You . . . who have once sat beside me in class . . . to consort with these dregs and scums. . . .’

They pulled him down on to the ground. Two men sat on him while the others went through his luggage. They found the ring without much difficulty. He had tied it up in one of Lisa’s small white handkerchiefs. Translucent and lovely it caught the light of the torches. The men gathered round, their faces greenish in the torch light, looking at it. Then they looked down at Frank. He lay on the permanent way, dazed, his face bleeding.

' Better finish it. He knows you,' said one of the men, and the one who had been at college with Frank and had been his friend raised his sten gun and gave him a burst through the heart. Then they kicked him into the nullah beside the track, under the tangled telegraph wires, and clambered down the bank and made off across the uncultivated paddy land that was going back to jungle, where no one dared live and work because of them. For a little while their torches flickered and winked between the trees, till they too, became a part of the darkness.

A volunteer driver was found amongst the passengers, who drove the train as fast as it would go, down to Rangoon. Frank lay in the nullah on his back, his neat luggage and the food carrier with the meals Lisa had cooked for him, scattered all about him. Out of the undergrowth presently a great rat appeared, and found it, and hastened off to take the good news to the colony in the pineapple garden.

Presently the stars came out. They lit Frank's gentle face as he lay there, wide-eyed, staring up at them with an expression of intolerable surprise.

It was some time before anyone discovered what had happened. Lisa did not worry at first when she heard nothing. Posts were so bad and unreliable she thought nothing of his silence and waited for him to walk in one day. The first inkling they had of something amiss was when the Rich Uncle's letter, a month on the way, told them Frank had never arrived.

Steve heard of it when the names of the victims of the last railway hold-up were mentioned in the paper. He took a plane north at once. There was nothing in his mind but a terrible fear. The lists said there had been three unidentified bodies, and for all he knew, one of them might be Lisa. She might have thrown in her hand and have been on her way down to him as she had promised.

And even if she wasn't dead, what would her position now be, alone in a foreign land amongst people not her people, her husband gone? He did not consider it very likely that Frank's family would have warmed to his foreign wife, and as the aeroplane droned through the morning heat mists that hung over the endless plains, he realized with a lift at his heart that if she was still alive, there would now be nothing between them. She

could come back to Rangoon with him. At last they could be married and all the longing and desire he had denied and suppressed for so many months, took possession of him, and half maddened him with impatience and fear, and nothing mattered but to see her again and to touch her and hold her in his arms. Between sleeping and waking he dreamed dreams of a future as beautiful and as easily attained and near at hand, as the airy dreams of Frank himself had been.

He found the little house on the river bank in the coco-nut grove deserted and empty. It had a wrecked and ransacked air, as though thieves had recently been through it. The cushions had been slashed. The curtains lay in heaps on the ground, and now Steve's hopes died and half crazed with fear, all the terrible possibilities of the situation tearing at his mind, he started to run to find someone—anyone—who could give him news. Presently he saw ahead of him down the dusty street, the shabby red brick building of the post office.

The Postmaster was sitting behind the grating picking his teeth thoughtfully with a piece of wire, as he sorted out a collection of brass nuts and screws from a little heap on the table in front of him. He seemed friendly and most anxious to help and he handed Steve a free copy of a week-old newspaper. No cause for anxiety whatever, he assured Steve. Nothing whatever had happened to Frank's wife. There she was. Now in the good wooden bungalow up on the hill. Still keeping her school.

'And charging,' said the Postmaster sourly, 'what kind of high prices! Ai! Ai! And how much shoe leather is worn out in the coming and going. Running, running! I am a poor man, but still I continue to send my children there. They teach some good ideas. As for this other affair, bad, bad. But there it is. The reason for it can easily be discovered. This young man departed for Rangoon taking a valuable ring he wished to sell. She wrote a letter to someone telling them he was coming, and so the news leaked out. All very difficult,' said the Postmaster, with a false smile.

'How could the news leak out?' said Steve, eyeing him with angry distaste.

The Postmaster spread hopeless hands, and shrugged his

shoulders so that he looked for a moment like an elderly vulture about to take off.

'Perhaps somebody opened a letter. Who can tell, sir? Nowadays people very dishonest—everything very difficult,' said the Postmaster, returning to the business of sorting out his brass screws and nuts.

She was alive and well. Nothing had harmed her. The fact swamped even Steve's hot dislike of the Postmaster, and he hurried out into the street, in the direction the Postmaster had told him. The children were singing. He heard them already as he climbed the dusty road up the hill. Singing in high shrill voices :

'Lavender's blue, dilly-dilly
Lavender's green.
When you are king, dilly-dilly,
I shall be queen. . . .'

She was standing alone, some little way from the compound, beside the frangipanni hedge at the end of the compound. She wore the blue frock he had seen her in on the ship in what now seemed another life. It was faded, and much too big for her, and he was shocked at her whiteness and thinness. He went and stood beside her, and took her hand, and she looked up at him, and then clung to him, sobbing, and for a little while all his passion was forgotten in his great pity. He held her close.

'Little one. Don't cry.'

'To happen like that. To him, who never willingly harmed anyone, and who believed always the good of all the world. "They will not harm me," he said. "They are my own people. They know who I am." That was the bitterest part of all.'

'Many things happen out here, these days, it is not easy to understand,' he said, and he thought, 'For her it is over now. I will take care of her. . . .'

'Just when I hoped to be able to do something for him, to help him,' she sobbed. 'I did not love him as a woman loves a man. I loved him as a mother loves her child, I think.' She blew her nose with a pitiful childish gesture, and said, 'Perhaps it is something you cannot understand.'

'I understand it well enough,' he said roughly, and he thought

of Stella, who when he had been hurt and broken could not love him in any way at all, and had slammed the door and run away. The memory no longer hurt him as it once had done.

'You must leave all this now—come back with me. I have fixed up with the wife of a friend of mine.'

She disengaged herself from his arms, then, and moved a little away from him, shaking her head.

'No. For some little time I must remain here, till I can arrange for the school and make sure that the old father and mother are safe. I must do what has to be done.'

'Why you?' he said rebelliously angry. 'Aren't there others?'

She nodded. 'But they need me. It is all I can do for him, who did so much for me. I cannot just go—now.'

He wanted to say, 'I need you, also, Lisa. God knows I need you.' He wanted to cry rebelliously, 'You don't love me, or you would come.' But he did not say it, and his mouth was suddenly dry for the fear that was in his heart. Maybe this way of life had got hold of her, as it did of some people. Maybe she would never come to him at all.

As though she guessed what was in his mind, she took his hand between her own again.

'I will come to you, Steve. But first I must do what I have to do. They are my people and I cannot leave them. In their good days they did everything for me, who had nothing. Everything I have, Frank gave me. Now I must give them something back.'

He held her small face tenderly between his hands, and looked down at her, and words that had often been in his heart came to his lips almost without his knowing it.

'I wonder who you really are?' he said. 'Where had it come from, this air of breeding, and sense of responsibility, this integrity so astounding in a little girl from a displaced persons' camp?'

No one would ever know.

'I wonder who you really are!' he repeated, and she looked at him, her eyes swimming, and said, 'I am the one who will one day be your wife. When the proper mourning days are finished, and I have done what has to be done here.'

'Then you will come?' he said.

She nodded. 'Then I will come.'

On the wide veranda of the bungalow the children were now playing games, their shrill voices filling the hot morning.

'In and out the windows,
In and out the windows,
In and out the windows,
As we have done before. . . .'

Hand in hand Steve and Lisa walked to the house, and stood leaning over the low veranda rail, watching them. Assorted little children of every nation—Chinese—Karen—Burman, and mixtures of all three, they danced together solemnly holding hands. Neat as new pins, with well brushed hair and clean faces.

'We make a great point of cleanliness,' said Lisa.

When the game ended, the children filed past their teacher, a pretty Burmese girl with a flower in her hair. The little girls curtsied, the little boys bowed.

'We make a great point of manners,' said Lisa.

'She is accomplishing more than all the embassies and goodwill missions can ever hope to,' he thought, and again the fear was bitter in his heart, that all this would take her away from him.

FIFTEEN

THERE was room in the big house for the whole family. Frank's father and mother only needed one room, and a corner for the family altar and the household gods. Saw Win would not come and live with them, though Lisa begged him to do so. He took over the little mat house in the coco-nut grove and set it to rights, and very soon had it fixed up as neatly and comfortably as in Lisa's days there. He could do anything with his hands, and in spite of his lack of education was far more practical and efficient than Frank had ever been. And now that he was no longer overshadowed by his handsome and well-educated brother, he seemed to grow in stature, and his ugliness had a charm of its own. Gradually the father and mother began to look up to him, and to consult him.

He got the rice mill going. When the next season's paddy was reaped and ready, he milled it himself. Sufficient for the family for a year there was, and some left over to sell. Often it seemed to Lisa that Saw Win never slept, for waking in the night she would see his light, like a small star in a cage, twinkling away on the river bank.

When the flowering trees flung their gaudy mantle over the countryside again with the coming of the hot weather, there were one hundred and twenty-five pupils in Lisa's school. An enterprising contractor ran a bus from neighbouring villages. The children now paid twenty rupees a month each. The school itself could now take care of the family.

Saw Win bought himself a European suit of froggie green and a yellow pullover and some bright yellow shoes, which Lisa thought a pity, but they gave him great self confidence when he interviewed the Chinamen who came from time to time snooping round, trying to buy up property cheap.

Saw Win sent them packing. It was Saw Win who fixed with the Rowe Company in Rangoon to sell the table mats and handkerchiefs the big girls learned to make in the needlework school. It was Saw Win who sold off the machinery they could

not use, advantageously, to a Government department, turning a deaf ear on the Chinamen.

But still, whenever she spoke of leaving them, the old people wept.

'You are the eldest son's wife. Saw Win is a boy. He has no education. 'He is not married.'

Lisa bided her time, writing sad little letters to Steve, never certain he got any of them. She grew thin and hollow-eyed, and all her beauty faded. No one noticed it, save Saw Win where he sat in the evenings when he visited them, softly playing his mouth organ. Often, looking up, Lisa would find his eyes upon her, but what he was thinking about nobody knew, for he never said.

Frank had now been dead a year, and the mourning period was over, when Lisa had a bad go of dysentery that kept her out of the school for almost a month. On her first morning back, she looked up from her desk where she was doing the accounts, and found Saw Win standing there. He had dressed himself in his best Burmese clothes, a rose silk *putsoe*, and he wore on his head the silk scarf that betokened a ceremonious occasion, but his pleasant ugly face wore an impish grin.

'I come to you for permission, my Eldest Brother's Wife,' he said, and his voice was an excellent imitation of his father's voice.

'What do you want permission for?' she asked him, laughing. 'What is it you want to do? Not, I hope, build another pagoda?'

'No, Lee Sa,' he said solemnly. 'I want to get married. If I am married and head of my house my parents will think more of me and they will trust me.'

She looked at him, her eyes widening, and just for a moment the thought that rose in her mind turned her sick.

'I have an idea to marry Ma May,' said Saw Win, 'and Ma May has an idea to marry me.'

In her relief and happiness she could have cried. Why had she never thought of it before? She got up and gave him an impulsive little hug.

'Then you consider it is a good idea? Splendid. We can then come and live in this bungalow and run the school. And

you,' he said softly, 'can return to your own people, only visiting us sometimes.'

He looked down at the ground as he said it, avoiding her eyes, and in that moment she knew that he had guessed about Steve. He, of them all, had guessed her secret. Not Frank, who loved her, had guessed. Now the school would flourish and the old people would be looked after. There would be no more hair-brained schemes and expensive undertakings, because of them all she knew it was Saw Win, the ugly one without any education, who had his feet firmly planted on the ground.

Then Ma May came in, and cried a little.

'Everything will go on as you like it. You will be our Directress. You can come from time to time and inspect us and make suggestions. And we will look well after the old people. We can do what has to be done.'

She was free at last. She got up after Saw Win and Ma May had gone, and walked to the bottom of the garden where she and Steve had stood together, now more than a year ago. Now she could go to him at last. The thought of it turned her a little dizzy, and she leaned her forehead against the smooth bole of the tree feeling suddenly lost and alone. She had not heard from him for a long time, but mails in those parts being what they were, it had not surprised or worried her unduly. What was between her and Steve would go on for ever and ever, whether there were letters or no letters, whether she knew, or did not know where he was, she had told herself.

But now there was a little fear in her heart, though she would not acknowledge it. Supposing he had forgotten her? Supposing that by now he had found someone else?

She arranged to take the Wednesday plane down to Rangoon. She would go to the Strand Hotel, and from there telephone Steve. She folded her Burmese clothes—the beautiful rose and gold silk *lounyis* that Frank had given her, and which she would now not wear any more. She gave them to Ma May. She dressed herself in the faded blue dress, the only piece of her European wardrobe that was still wearable, and stood for a moment looking at herself in the mirror. It was no longer a young girl's face that looked back at her. The eyes were

shadowed, the cheeks too thin and all her colour had gone. Yes, she thought ruefully, it was more than possible Steve had forgotten her.

To her surprise, Saw Win arrived at the bungalow very early on Wednesday morning, dressed in his European clothes. He intended to accompany her, he said, and return by train.

Lisa put her foot down there and then.

'Train travel is not safe, as we well know. You must remain here, Saw Win, and look after things for us all. If you go, then I cannot go.'

'Very well,' he said slowly. Then suddenly she saw him stoop down and remove his good European shoes, and he took off the homburg hat in which he had never looked quite right, and placed it on top of his shoes, his plain face tender.

'What are you doing !' she said.

'It is something that it is our custom to do to those we love and respect,' he said. He knelt before her and placed his forehead on his folded hands against her feet, in the old-fashioned reverend obeisance—a queer enough figure in his European suiting, but touching beyond all words. She laid a hand on his head, her eyes full of tears, and said what she had so often said to his brother, 'My little child !'

From the window of the aircraft she watched the familiar sweep of the river, with all the fantastic projects once engineered by Mr. Fong falling into it—and the little town with its one wide street, and the square red building of the P.O. OFFICE and the bungalow on the hill where the children would be singing out in the garden. She watched until the heat haze of the morning took the familiar scene away, and the scarlet blaze of the flamboyants faded and disappeared in a mist of tears.

Nobody had written to tell her how ill Steve was. Nobody at the nursing home out by the big lakes knew anything about her. Steve had refused to be taken there until he was too far gone to be able to tell anyone anything.

'I'm sure there's a girl somewhere,' said the night sister. She was the one who sat up with him through the dark hours, and heard his thin voice rambling and muttering. For some reason she had made up her mind it was a Burmese girl, but it made no

difference. People are kinder now than in the other days, and the sister wished she could find her, whoever she was. Here were the makings of another of those Eastern tragedies that are so common and so grim, that no one ever heard about. As soon as he was fit to be moved, he would be flown home, and the girl, whoever she might be, would know nothing of it, and would sit waiting for the letter that never came. The sister's heart was soft because she, too, had once waited for a letter that never came.

Sometimes Steve was back at school. Sometimes, on his bad nights, he was back over Berlin, the flak all round him, baling out, his two hands holding his broken face. And there was another and even grimmer nightmare that awaited him, for it was a winter's evening again, and he fought his way through the biting needles of snow, looking for a London house and a lit window. For this time, he said, when I get there I shall go down and call to her, and she will open the door, and all this will be over and done with.

But the street went on and on endlessly, and when at last, aching and exhausted, he found the house, it was empty and deserted. The windows were all darkened. Nobody was at home.

The sister was young and pretty, and she was tender hearted. There was little she could do for him when these nightmares were on him, nightmares in which he relived past scenes of his life that she could not follow. Sometimes, awaking and seeing her standing by his bed, he took her for Stella. Stella gazing down at him horror stricken, her mouth open ready to give that parrot scream that went through his head, and he would have to listen again to the slam of the door, and the feet running down the passage, away and away and out of his life.

He had been dozing a little on a breathless afternoon with the hot-weather bird shrieking its warning at him through the window from the shelter of a jacaranda. And suddenly he knew the old terror and chill that was the beginning of his nightmare. The voices talking. The hurrying feet. But this time the door did not slam, it opened, and through the haze of his fever and wretchedness, voices reached him brokenly.

'We did not know your name, or we would have communicated with you. Thank goodness you have come.'

A little star rose suddenly, most comforting, through the blackness of his private night. If I can keep my eyes on that, he thought, it will be all right. Everything will be all right. The star would keep the nightmare at bay.

'Steve. . . .' she said softly. 'I've come. Oh my darling, I've come for always. . . .'

He could not say anything because of his great weakness. He tried to raise a hand to touch her, to make certain that this was real. But both his arms were temporarily transformed into tree trunks too heavy to lift. He did manage to turn his face towards the voice, and managed a slow wide smile.